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FORM AND INSTABILITY

ANITA STAROSTA

EASTERN EUROPE, LITERATURE, POSTIMPERIAL DIFFERENCE



Form and Instability



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Form and Instability

Eastern Europe, Literature, Postimperial Difference

Anita Starosta



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Acknowledgments

How do you start at the beginning, if things happen before they happen?

CLARICE LISPECTOR, *The Hour of the Star*

To acknowledge others' help and inspiration is also to locate origins. Here, I am obliged to name only the most direct, the ones I can be sure of. And so this book owes much to Wład Godzich, who seems to have always already been there. In her seminar "Transfigurations," Teresa de Lauretis first taught me to connect translation and figuration and more than once pointed me in the right direction. James Clifford's teaching has had a gradual and long-acting influence as I have come to recognize in his work what I may have learned from him, without realizing it, in the first place: the value of instability, open-endedness. Gina Dent and Neferti Tadiar showed me how to seek out difficulty in the silence that happens when incongruous discourses and objects are made to confront one another—to take stammering as a sign of meaningfulness yet to be found. All of this built on the work of my previous teachers: María Antonia Garcés and David Grossvogel, along with the late Don Fredericksen and Dick Neisser, at Cornell; and Andrzej Dąbrowski and Ewa Radziwinowicz still earlier.

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For Matt Tierney, always my first reader, I am still looking for the words.

Form and Instability

Introduction

In the wake of historical change, where might vestigial frames of thinking and obsolescent categories be seen to persist? More urgently still, by what means might they be finally dislodged and ushered out of existence? The dissolution of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the subsequent accession of many former Soviet bloc countries to the European Union have produced observable material changes: economic, social, political, cultural, and demographic. This empirical register of ongoing historical change has received ample attention not only from social scientists but also from historians and cultural theorists. On the epistemic and discursive registers, however, the category of “Eastern Europe”—as a region set apart from, and derivative of, Europe—has an altogether distinct temporality. It lingers on in dispersed, often invisible ways. It is out of step with history.

Form and Instability busies itself with the work of accounting for this discrepancy between ostensible historical change and the persistence of anachronistic ways of thinking, a discrepancy that remains unaddressed and eludes attention; and it goes on to propose that literature—not simply as an archive of representations or a source of cultural capital but as a critical perspective in its own right—offers a way to apprehend and to redress this problem. Historical situations such as the post-1989 transitions to capitalism and liberal democracy, as well as the “Eastern” enlargement of the EU, do not only entail empirical change; they also call for and provoke intense renegotiations of cultural

values and analytical concepts. Through figurality, reading, and translation—terms central to this book—literature will be seen to expedite and redirect such rearrangements. It will be shown to destabilize discursively fixed categories without imposing, in turn, its own fixity.

Located at the intersection of comparative literature, area studies, and literary theory, this book has a twofold commitment: to Eastern Europe on the one hand and to literature on the other. It aims to intervene in the way we conceive of Eastern Europe by seeking to develop a more equitable way of thinking, one that avoids subordinating it to Eurocentric narratives of progress. At the same time, it marshals literature as both object and method of this rethinking and extends existing conceptions of the usefulness and the proper organization of literary studies. The three terms in the subtitle of this book mark a passage—via literature—from “Eastern Europe” as an inadequate and obsolescent category to “postimperial difference” as a more accurate, if provisional, account of the formal and existential condition of the region. By way of original readings of texts that span the twentieth century, and by way of attention to literature as a critical perspective, received cultural boundaries and modes of knowledge will emerge unsettled and displaced.

EASTERN EUROPE: AN OBSOLESCENT CATEGORY

As a toponym for a specific location, “Eastern Europe” is manifestly unstable. It bears the traces of competing, intersecting imperial histories—of older European empires (Russian, Prussian, Habsburg, and Ottoman), of Cold War–era Soviet domination, and, less tangibly, of Western European colonialism—all of which have left their marks. Writing about “Eastern Europe” often entails deciphering a palimpsest of shifting borders and regional fault lines that mark its symbolic geography in order to settle its instability. Writing about it thus involves, among other things, engaging with the relative accuracy of one label over another and tracking the exact location of one or another boundary.¹ The cultural and developmentalist attributes associated with particular demarcations within the region follow these imperial lines: “Central Europe,” for example, evokes the relative political freedoms and ethnic pluralism of the Habsburg Empire even as it is also associated with the Prussian and German idea of *Mitteleuropa* and, later in the twentieth century, with dissident intellectuals’ appeals

for recognition as properly European. “Southeastern Europe,” on the opposite end of the spectrum, occupies the lowest point on the continental axis of civilization organized from Northwest to Southeast—a point at which the ascription of backwardness and tribalism appears most pronounced. Such negotiations of terms and boundaries among scholars and writers, moreover, also reflect the everyday negotiations of Eastern Europe’s lived reality. Through a process that Milica Bakić-Hayden has termed “nesting Orientalisms,” external constructions of developmental difference have combined with internal rivalries to further entrench cultural hierarchies within the region.²

The precise sense in which “Eastern Europe” figures in this book must be distinguished from such demarcations, even as it also coincides—geographically and politically—with the former Soviet bloc. Here, Eastern Europe is not a territory but a historical condition with specific formal features and a distinct relation to language. Rather than a clearly delineated location, “Eastern Europe” is a discursive construction and a mobile signifier of difference from Europe proper—a matter of symbolic geography, not of identifiable borders. Moreover, my use of *Eastern*—situated in the context of European unification, and concerned with the integration of “Eastern” Europe into Europe proper—necessarily evokes the connotations of “Eastern enlargement” and “Eastern bloc,” both of which mark the territory between the former Berlin Wall and Russia.³ In popular discourse, “Eastern” Europe bears cultural traits associated with backwardness; and, while the invocation of such traits may be more muted in scholarly discourse, the presumption of difference and discreteness is there nonetheless, inscribed in the very organization of knowledge.

“Eastern” Europe is thus a marked category vis-à-vis the unmarked “Europe,” whose presence and inclusion—rather than absence and exclusion—demand explanation. According to a logic that appears too self-evident to require explicit articulation, “Eastern” Europe is positioned as the other of (Western) Europe. If “Europe” has been defined by the mutual implication of developments such as the modern nation-state, industrial capitalism, secularism, political and economic liberalism, the Enlightenment, and overseas colonial expansion—along with the self-ascribed values of civility and openness to others—then “Eastern Europe” has been said to take part in these developments in a belated and derivative way, always adopting the European model to some degree of fidelity or failure. Economically, then, “Eastern Europe was in some sense . . . backward long before it was absorbed

into the broader Western world market. This backwardness had roots in the very distant past.”⁴ Politically, the influence of Western ideals, supposed to have penetrated Eastern Europe by the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is said to have had only a superficial effect: “Underneath the structures that aped Western state institutions there existed a variety of arrangements that deeply affected the lives of their subjects. Here, too, the past remained to constrain the paths toward the future.”⁵ This construction, with lag and lack as the defining modes of relation to Europe as the model, is discernible within discourses ranging from the scholarly to the popular and is consistently applied to all spheres, from economics to the intangibles of mentality.

In an example of this all-encompassing discursive construction, one historian—moved to demonstrate Eastern Europe’s enduring essence “from prehistory to postcommunism”—asserts that “its population’s attachment to democracy has been both uncertain and of brief duration; its institutions were weaker than the West’s, its legal formations less developed.” Nearly seamlessly, such characteristics are supplemented with less tangible yet equally enduring traits: “Certain distinctive inclinations and habits of mind also arose: tendencies to bureaucracy and collectivism; stronger urges to national self-realization than to personal autonomy; a disposition to ideology. And love of poetry, idealism and cynicism are all more evident in Eastern Europe than in the West.”⁶ This comprehensive inventory is remarkable not only for the particular attributes ascribed to the region but for its comparative tenor, with “the West” standing for a model against which every facet of life is measured.

With a similar presumption of backwardness and derivativeness, a *New York Times* article—published in May 2004, just as ten new member states, most from the former Soviet bloc, were about to join the European Union—described the impending enlargement as a shift “from a plush club of 15 like-minded nations into a street bazaar of countries differing in wealth, stature and outlook.” Notions of political and economic difference intertwined with notions of cultural otherness: the new members, the article announced, “tend to have different economies and demographics than the current European Union members.” If the economic difference was clear, however, what precisely was different about the demographics was merely suggested by phrases like “street bazaar,” “eager to receive handouts,” and “ingrained corruption.”⁷ Here as in other popular sources dealing with Eastern Europe, economic, demographic, and cultural characteristics come to

belong to the same lexicon, in which roots and distinctions are erased, of no consequence.

Scholars such as Larry Wolff and Maria Todorova have labored, precisely, to uncover the roots—and to reveal the pervasiveness and the continuing effects—of this discursive construction. Even as they distance themselves from postcolonial studies, they rely on colonial discourse analysis and critiques of Eurocentrism to bring to light the historical influences and cultural hierarchies underlying the categories of “Eastern Europe” and the Balkans, respectively. Wolff in particular traces the development of the “Eastern Europe” category to the Enlightenment and considers it to be a by-product of emerging Orientalism, with the region functioning as a buffer zone between the civilized and the barbaric. The particular attributes—physiognomic as well as cultural—asccribed to Poles and Russians by Western European travelers, philosophers, and cartographers of the eighteenth century turned them into “demi-savage figures.” “The study of Eastern Europe,” according to Wolff, “like Orientalism, was a style of intellectual mastery, integrating knowledge and power, perpetrating domination and subordination.”⁸ Other scholars trace the partition of Europe only to the post–World War II balance of power between the Allies and the Soviet Union. For the historian Norman Davies, Allied priorities and assumptions not only facilitated the construction of a bipartite Europe after the war but were “projected back into more remote periods,” retroactively inflecting historical narratives with notions of Western and Eastern Europe as distinct spheres. This a priori frame, Davies writes, has guided “the studied neglect of all facts which do not add credence” to it.⁹

Taking such historically grounded critiques as a point of departure, *Form and Instability* moves beyond discourse analysis and beyond historical roots—not to ask where such ideas come from or how they have shaped popular perceptions, policy decisions, or scholarly fields, but to ask, instead, how they may be finally laid to rest and dislodged. Rather than focusing on the conditions of their emergence, I inquire into the conditions of their persistence and the conditions of their passing.

One aspect of this persistence is that the category of “Eastern Europe” at once encompasses and overshadows the more affirming self-conceptions developed by intellectuals from within the region, such as the notion of “Central Europe.” In its recent incarnation dating to the 1980s, when prominent Czech, Hungarian, and Polish writers asserted a coherent regional identity in order to appeal for overdue recognition

by the West, “Central Europe” was—as Milan Kundera put it in “The Tragedy of Central Europe”—nothing other than “a West kidnapped, displaced, and brainwashed,” a neglected part of Europe that was, nonetheless, the seat of “moral authority in a world stripped of values.”¹⁰ Central Europeanness is here a cultural identity based on the historical experience of small, threatened nations defined in opposition to Russia and aligned with the West in political, cultural, religious, and civilizational terms.¹¹ In bypassing the question of Central Europe in this book, I am not denying its historical validity or claiming to resolve the debate by declaring countries such as Poland to belong to Eastern instead of Central Europe after all. More important than the question of *where* or *whether* it might exist as a historical reality is the fact that Central Europeanness has functioned, in Todorova’s words, “as a device entitling its participants to a share of privileges” and has therefore, paradoxically, served to maintain, by displacing it elsewhere, the category of “Eastern Europe.”¹²

More importantly still, the category of “Eastern Europe” has operated without regard to Eastern or Central Europeans’ preferred self-designations. In contrast to the desirable identity conferred by Central Europe, Eastern Europe is a place no one wants to be from—it is a *there* rather than a *here*. Dubravka Ugrešić, the Croatian writer and scholar who left Zagreb in 1993 and is now based in Amsterdam, captures this sentiment in “Europa, Europa,” an essay about a train journey, dubbed Literaturexpress Europa 2000, in which a hundred writers from over forty countries visited eighteen European cities. In her essay, the mobile quality of “Eastern Europe” combines with a cultural stigma that the Eastern European writers riding the train are especially eager to leave behind: “As we left the Belarussian border at Brest,” Ugrešić reports, many travelers “felt like they were crossing the border between East and West. The Poles were relieved to hear this. The Belarussians were saddened.”¹³ But the question of where the East ends and where the West begins cannot be easily settled by reference to national borders. If for one passenger, a Western European writer, Slovakia belongs clearly in the East, then one of her fellow travelers, a Slovak writer, speaking for himself, matter-of-factly explains that “he was glad he had never been in Eastern Europe before (he meant Russia and Belarus), and now that he had been forced, essentially, to travel there, he was surer than ever that there was no reason to go *there* again.”¹⁴ According to his logic, people are entirely different in the East. Differences of degree that belong to Eastern Europe when it is asserted to be

an area in between West and East proper, a borderland or a crossroads of civilizations—and thus not wholly “other” to Europe—easily turn into differences of kind, through a mechanism that the much-preferred, if selective, designation of “Central Europe” is powerless to disable.

Because Ugrešić herself observes these dynamics with some distance and bemusement—and because she does not partake in her fellow writers’ anxious need to establish that they are Western beyond a doubt and that, therefore, “they are on the right side of life”—she offers the rare perspective of an Eastern European who is at home in Eastern Europe.¹⁵ A “junkie for Eastern European sentiment,” she welcomes the familiar traces of socialist-era everydayness that she finds miraculously intact in Malbork, Poland, in a stuffy hotel outfitted with threadbare sheets and ficus plants: “In the sleepy early morning moment I began to feel as if I had arrived at some sort of beginning . . . and I realized I’d come home. . . . I was overcome by a feeling of dense, warm reconciliation with my own biography, with *them*, with the *Easterners*—liars, smart alecks, tricksters, matchbox swindlers, sleaze-balls, thieves, petty and big-time operators, survivors (because there was never time left over for living life, but only for survival).”¹⁶ Ugrešić embraces the markers of Eastern European difference that for everyone else are only a source of shame.

If she is able to sympathize and even identify “with *them*, with the *Easterners*,” it is not only because being among them feels like home but also because she recognizes such stereotypes to be the product, to a large extent, of the West-East divide itself, which is historical and economic as much as it is discursive and affective. Her fellow travelers’ judgments of the East are based on direct perceptions only to some extent: “I didn’t hear any of the writers complain about the bad hotels in Madrid or Brussels (though they were bad),” she writes, “but I did hear many of them complain about bad hotels in Malbork.”¹⁷ Qualitatively identical things such as bad hotels or rude waiters receive divergent evaluations depending on where they are with respect to the divide.

The “yawning” rift within Europe is constituted not so much by objectively verifiable differences as by a reciprocal fantasy of difference—but a fantasy that, nevertheless, does not guarantee reciprocity. Ugrešić writes: “I am sure that many of my fellow West European writers felt uncomfortable during the trip, or even felt scorn for the East which is not the West, for the East aspiring to be the West, *and for the East which is like the West*. . . . Most of the Western fantasies about the East come from an *unarticulated* feeling of superiority, just as most

of the Eastern fantasies about the West spring from an *articulated* sense of inferiority.”¹⁸ For most of the riders, the possibility that there may not be a difference between East and West after all turns out to be most difficult to admit. At stake in maintaining “Eastern Europe” as a *there* is an undisturbed sense of Western European identity, which depends on an unarticulated—because naturalized and perpetually confirmed—sense of superiority.

My resistance to the discursive construction of “Eastern Europe” as backward and derivative—staged in what follows—is distinct, therefore, from the often-voiced objections that there is no such thing as “Eastern Europe” because the region is actually far from uniform, because there are material, linguistic, religious, and historical differences among individual countries, or because Eastern Europeans themselves are often reluctant to identify in terms of their regional belonging. This resistance is distinct as well from the impulse to show such discursive constructions to be patently false by producing evidence to the contrary. For the point is, precisely, that discursive constructions function independently of what is actual; they serve, proof against any verification, to provide a priori terms of analysis and comparison. This resistance, finally, must not be mistaken for an assertion that real progress, at least in some countries of the region, has indeed taken place since the fall of the Berlin Wall and that, for this reason, some countries no longer fit the category of “Eastern Europe.” Such an assertion would leave the category itself undisturbed and would merely displace it. More importantly still, such an assertion would not only submit to particular narratives of progress, such as those of the triumph of the free market or the superiority of liberal democracy, but would, more insidiously, affirm progress itself as an unquestioned, and sole, mode of historical imagination—the very frame of reference that this book strives to think against.

In taking for granted the need to reimagine “Eastern Europe,” then, this book asserts no more and no less than the following: the post-1989 historical moment has opened to view the noncoincidence between knowledge production and empirical reality and has brought into question the category of “Eastern Europe” itself. At the same time, recent developments in critical thought such as postcolonial theory and a new, world-oriented comparative literature have provided tools for rethinking Eurocentrism. This book exploits this momentary opening in the Other Europe’s historical condition on the one hand, and these critical tools on the other hand, in order not simply to reform the terms in

which the region might come to be understood anew but, more importantly, to trace new connections and new modes of relation. To put it differently: if the discursive construction of Eastern Europe manifests itself in innumerable instances across a variety of discourses, it is also—and much less transparently—maintained by the organization and production of knowledge in general, from the social sciences to the humanities. It is the latter—the fundamental categories, and the disciplinary boundaries, of thought rather than the specific traits attributed to the region—that demand the kind of active rethinking enabled, as I will argue, by literature.

LITERATURE: OBJECT AND MODE OF KNOWLEDGE

The literary works examined here span the twentieth century: from the Nobel Prize-winning novelist Henryk Sienkiewicz, a patriot who writes from within partitioned Poland at the turn of the century, and Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, his contemporary, who was denounced as a traitor for making his own career as Joseph Conrad, an English writer; to Witold Gombrowicz, whose work, interrupted by World War II, resumed in exile in Argentina; to Tadeusz Konwicki, who wrote from within Soviet-dominated Poland and whose own political commitment shifted from initial support for the Communist Party to ardent participation in the opposition; to Ryszard Kapuściński, a foreign correspondent for the Polish Press Agency, whom Salman Rushdie has described as “the kind of codebreaker [of our century’s secrets] we need”;¹⁹ to, finally, Józef Tischner, a theologian and philosopher whose concerns span Levinasian ethics and rural activism and whose working idioms include Husserlian phenomenology and a highlander dialect of the Tatra mountains.

These divergent figures will not fit a single literary-historical narrative, and although they all hold the Polish language as their common mother tongue they also exceed the national frame: Conrad, Konwicki, and Kapuściński were all born, and two of them worked, outside the current borders of the Polish state; Conrad’s career placed him in the English literary tradition; and Gombrowicz in emigration remained an outsider, at least until a major international prize late in life turned him—much to his dismay—into the pride of the Polish nation. Although the themes of Polishness have a place in all of these writers’ concerns, and although Polish literary history has a stake in

maintaining or recuperating them as primarily Polish writers, in this book I focus on the ways in which they all draw on, elaborate, and contest not only these nation-centered frames but more importantly the regional frame of Eastern Europe—a structural position more than an identity, and an underlying condition that directly affects both the reception and the aesthetic-political properties of their work.²⁰

The focus on the figural dimensions of their work—that is, on rhetorical modes and themes such as allegory, deixis, irony, form, and translation—constitutes the most discernible way in which literature emerges here as a mode of knowledge rather than simply an object. Figures are not ahistorical and not opposed to history; rather, as Timothy Bahti has put it, “Tropes and allegory are the means of the production of historical meaning.”²¹ Figures, in other words, do not distort history but are the very site of historical meaningfulness. Thus, instead of asking how Polishness, Eastern Europeanness, or Europeanness is represented in the works under analysis here (a question that presumes a mimetic relationship between language and world, and that invites thinking in essentialist terms), I ask how they are figured, put into question, and reworked.

Contextual, historical, political, and geographic categories are usually treated as given, taken both to stand outside and to preexist the properly textual, aesthetic elements of literary works. But such geographic-cultural boundaries, apparently stable and natural, will turn out to be produced and maintained by established narratives, discursive constructions, and habits of reading. What Hans Robert Jauss, after Gadamer, called “horizons of expectation”—the mostly implicit moral, social, and aesthetic standards that underlie the reception of literary works at any moment in history—thus turn out to include ideas of what constitutes a coherent cultural location or identity, and, conversely, what constitutes an appropriate, meaningful transgression of these boundaries and what begins to threaten established orders of intelligibility with sheer incoherence or unjustified eclecticism.²²

This expanded notion of a “horizon of expectation”—one that includes notions of self and other, of what is familiar and what is foreign, and thus also of proper cultural boundaries—is useful at a moment when literary studies continues to grapple with the question of how to move beyond Eurocentric, national, and identity-centered canons.²³ For the question of how to renegotiate the formerly secure divide between the universal and the particular has been at the center of the preoccupation with the possibility of post-Eurocentric and

transnational literary studies. To put it differently, the presumption that the established, hegemonic traditions are directly relevant for a universal human subject while the heretofore-marginal traditions can be meaningful only to a specific historical-cultural location has presented a central challenge in attempts to formulate a post-Eurocentric, expanded cultural field.

In response to this challenge, works such as Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* and Walter D. Mignolo's *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* have questioned the assumption that Europe and its colonies were distinct spaces and have shown instead that the colonies and colonialism were constitutive of cultural and historical developments apparently internal to Europe. In such postcolonial reframings of the self-other relation, then, the other has been shown always already to be implicated with the self. This is one means through which postcolonial studies—as an instance in a longer history of questioning the canon that includes Marxist, feminist, and ethnic studies critiques as well—has succeeded in prompting a rethinking of literary studies. Alongside such radical critiques, other bases of incorporating the formerly marginal exist—other frames of intelligibility that make the previously obscure traditions meaningful. These include a benevolent multiculturalism that strives to celebrate multiplicity on an additive model (in which the previously irrelevant find their relevance by enriching the universal human subject of history); a pragmatic globalism that treats non-European cultural production as a source of education into a cosmopolitan, or sometimes merely corporate, citizenship; or an unabashed universalism, interested only in finding an essential human experience to be recoverable from literary works situated in specific historical experiences. These newfound uses of the previously excluded traditions, moreover, often eclipse or deflect the decolonizing ambitions of the impulse to expand the literary field and respond instead to the globalizing imperatives of the twenty-first-century university.²⁴

For all this, however, *Form and Instability* is not another postcolonial take on the European Second World. The past two decades have seen the emergence of scholarship dedicated to examining both external representations of the region and internal negotiations of its position through the lens of postcolonial studies. This work has undoubtedly brought new and valuable questions to bear on Eastern Europe, although it has also encountered a limit in the foundational problem of whether the region is or is not postcolonial, and therefore to what extent postcolonial studies might be adapted to it as a ready-made

critical tool kit.²⁵ In taking distance from such inscriptions, I see postcolonial studies of Eastern Europe as an adoption of yet another frame of intelligibility—an attempt to reframe the region from obscurity into recognizability, and thus, finally, to find a durable mode of belonging.²⁶ In distinction, this book takes coloniality and postcoloniality as no more and no less than a necessary part of the critical and historical context relevant to rethinking Eastern Europe.

At the same time, it is important for the reexamination of “Eastern Europe” through literature, undertaken here, to take place in this critical and historical context.²⁷ On the one hand, Eastern European literatures have been subject to similar exclusions, structurally positioned in ways analogous to Third World, or postcolonial, traditions with respect to the presumed center. Here, too, entrenched habits of comparison, embroiled in unequal power relations, have placed (Western) Europe at the center and relegated Eastern Europe to a margin. Literary canons and the institutional organization of literary studies reflect this dynamic: while Western literatures are positioned as if they dealt directly with universal themes and merited attention on their own terms for their aesthetic achievements, Eastern European literatures appear mediated by particular national histories and are seen, at best, to emulate Western models. The Cold War-era area studies paradigm has further entrenched this position by treating “Slavic” literatures instrumentally, as sources of cultural information or as companions to language instruction. Since knowledge about a nation or a region is inextricable from the way its culture (or its literature) is read, close reading is crucial for thinking outside these established frames of intelligibility.

Reading in the context of comparative literature debates on canonicity, literary value, comparison, translation, and dialect—debates that themselves often pay scant attention to reading and readability—will accomplish two tasks. The first is to incorporate Eastern Europe into a global cartography of difference that, so far, has relied on a First-Third World axis, to the often noted but unresolved exclusion of the European Second World. This kind of inscription redresses an important gap, not so much within postcolonial studies, which has inadvertently solidified this cartography, turning Europe into a unified space and effectively disappearing “Eastern Europe,” as more directly within methodological and theoretical interventions that inherit postcolonial theory’s analysis of global inequalities. Because one consequence of Eastern Europe’s positioning between Europe and not-Europe has

been the lack of adequate languages and analytical terms to account for its recent past and its present, attention to language itself rectifies its unarticulated exclusion. As I use debates in literary studies to recast Europe's literary field, the problem of the new, world-oriented comparative literature—how to develop modes of thinking that eschew Eurocentrism—is applied to, and tested in, the context of the cultural divide between Old and New Europe.

Form and Instability sets out to exploit reading as a critical approach. The evasion of reading occurs not only in the area studies organization of knowledge (which privileges positivist and empirical models, and which has subordinated the study of Eastern Europe to the resolution first of Cold War, and then of postcommunist, political and economic crises) but, less obviously, also in recent world literature debates in comparative literature (which, on their part, have also been largely silent on the question of Eastern European traditions).²⁸ To read “impurely, writings intermingled with one another, against the grain of ready—legitimate—identities,” as Stephen Heath has written, is “another definition of ‘world literature,’ the newness *its study makes*.”²⁹ Yet if the emphasis in world literature debates has been on impure identities and the intermingling of traditions, reading itself has remained unexplored, often taken for granted or dismissed as a luxury in a discipline suddenly confronted with an infinite field. The newness for which the study of world literature makes, I suggest, lies in the way it forces attention to reading as a critical practice capable of unsettling fixed boundaries and identities more thoroughly than a search for new objects, for new combinations of existing objects, or for new frames of intelligibility. My contribution rests not only in calling attention to a new object, in the guise of Eastern European literary texts, but also in focusing on reading as an unexplored methodological dimension.

Here, then, is the central theoretical premise of this book: reading, as an encounter with the rhetorical dimension of language, undermines the at once grammatical, ideological, and hermeneutic coherence of established frames of intelligibility—or horizons of expectation, to recall once more Jauss's formulation. This insight, borrowed from Paul de Man's work, guides the close readings conducted in each chapter. Such a treatment of literature goes beyond the concern with modes of inscription, representation, or narrative and toward literature as the only mode of knowledge that “knows and names itself as fiction.” Literature, de Man writes, is not a special category of language set apart from everyday language by qualities that might be proper to it.

What makes it different, rather, is merely that “it begins on the far side of this knowledge [that sign and meaning can never coincide]; it is the only form of language free from the fallacy of unmediated expression.” Literature pries open the otherwise-disavowed gap between sign and meaning and undermines the referential aspect of language. As de Man explains: “The self-reflecting mirror-effect by means of which a work of fiction asserts, by its very existence, its separation from empirical reality, its divergence, as a sign, from a meaning that depends for its existence on the constitutive activity of this sign, characterizes the work of literature in its essence.”³⁰ This insight is especially relevant for reading noncanonical, marginal works because they are still often treated as a means of direct access to the cultural or national contexts and identities to which they appear to be firmly tied. In the context of recent comparative literature debates, in other words, de Man’s deconstructive insight can help restore the textual dimension of all literary objects. And, as Gayatri Spivak has put it—with explicit reference to marginal, peripheral literatures—it can foster the habit of “reading the logic of rhetoric, not the text as cultural information.”³¹

POSTIMPERIAL DIFFERENCE: A PROVISIONAL ACCOUNT

What emerges in this book—a critical reexamination of the discursive construction of “Eastern Europe” through literature—is a provisional account of the region that is more serviceable for the present. It unmoors “Eastern Europe” both from the presumptions of backwardness, derivativeness, and discreteness that accompany it and from the categories of thought and modes of knowledge production that sustain those presumptions. It also, finally, traces new relations and connections that undo its isolation without, at the same time, denying its specificity. Literature itself—which, alongside Eastern Europe, constitutes the second of my stated commitments—attains here a new dimension. Reading, often elided in debates on world literature, is a crucial supplement that advances these debates beyond the constitution of new objects, past the problem of literary value, and out of ever-adjustable—but deadlocked—binaries of self and other.

Bringing to light Eastern Europe’s contemporary predicament—its post-imperial difference—requires a notion of cultural and historical specificity that is inextricable from language, aesthetics, and rhetoric. Dwelling in

postimperial difference means dwelling among layered borders and ubiquitous ruins that are by no means vanished. Asked to describe the place where he lived, for example, the Ukrainian writer Yuri Andrukhovych said:

The house I live in is on a street that currently bears the name of Shevchenko, but that used to be called Lindenallee because there are many old linden trees there, over a hundred years old. This avenue takes you toward the city park. All of this has echoes of the Habsburg Empire because this park was founded a long time ago and, at one point, it was named after Empress Elisabeth, the famous Sisi, wife of Franz Josef. After the Second World War, during the cult of Stalin, the street was renamed Stalin Street—and then, since the mid-’50s, it’s finally Shevchenko Street and the park is now also called Shevchenko Park, after the nineteenth-century founder of modern Ukrainian literature and language. This is—I mean, it was—one of the most elegant and beautiful streets in the city, a city I call Stanislavo-Frankivsk, to connect the old name Stanislaviv with the contemporary name, Frankivsk. Besides these, young people are calling the city Franyk. It’s a Galician city, and I can say that Galicia is my small homeland.³²

It is a place filled with ruins that do not denote mere pastness. “The specificity of ruins in this part of the world is that . . . you never know with them,” Andrukhovych explains. “There are no histories about them yet, no stories. Ruins are, most of all, a chance to create new images of the world, new wholes.”³³

For one of Andrukhovych’s frequent interlocutors, the Polish writer Andrzej Stasiuk, what I am calling the postimperial difference of Eastern Europe also expresses itself in a different sense of temporality and a different relationship to history—without, by the same token, being subsumed under “belatedness” or backwardness. It is thus a temporal difference that does not partake of the narratives of progress and lag inscribed in the discursive construction of “Eastern Europe” and that takes just as much distance from the more affirming elaborations of Central Europeanness.³⁴ The very idea of what counts as a proper narrative undergoes estrangement when Stasiuk, in the course of his travels through contemporary Eastern Europe, spends an evening with some Americans. These Americans, Stasiuk writes,

tried to teach me how to tell precise and engaging stories. And I swear I tried to comprehend the method but my own story

unraveled in my hands as they would ask from time to time why my protagonist doesn't seem to change, why he is the same at the end as he was at the beginning, and I tried to explain to them . . . that I'm tired of changes, that I would like for the world simply to persist and to stop doing somersaults, that what interests me is, precisely, immobility. . . . But I didn't know how to tell them this, even though I had a good translator—I didn't know how because they believed that good protagonists are masters of their own fate. . . . And I also knew that, in the morning, the Hungarians listening to my story after breakfast won't ask about the protagonist . . . but will be interested instead in what happens behind him, in the background. One of them will say, "Yes, I can see this world." And this will be enough. They, like me, will be interested in the persistence of reality.³⁵

Andrukhovych and Stasiuk seek ways of articulating the precise ways in which such a reality might be inhabited and habitable—and, by extension, apprehensible. Postimperial difference is not a pure abstraction that might displace concrete belonging; rather, it characterizes an existential condition in which the very distinctions between the abstract and the tangible undergo reformulation.

Form and Instability falls into two parts. On the surface, Part I, under the heading "Frames of Intelligibility," is more interdisciplinary because the two chapters that constitute it are each concerned with a specific register on which Eastern Europe's transition after 1989—a transition out of its regional and discursive seclusion—has been negotiated: the epistemological-institutional register of knowledge production about the region after the breakup of the Soviet bloc and the register of accession to the European Union. In both cases, a focus on the rhetorical dimension of language reveals unnoticed, unarticulated aspects of what are declared to be transitional phenomena, both of which are usually considered in social-scientific and empiricist terms. The frames of intelligibility in Part I include two emergent and overlapping ways in which the region has recently been reconsidered or is only beginning to be rethought—postsocialism and postcolonialism. The first chapter, "The Passing of Eastern Europe," deals with the legacy of Soviet domination and of the area studies paradigm that still governs knowledge production about the region, while the second chapter, "Strategies of Accession," confronts the legacy of Western colonial histories and discourses as it manifests itself in the process of European integration. By

mobilizing rhetoric, these chapters argue for a deliberate reworking of the category of “Eastern Europe.” They also show that empirical change alone, coupled with a positivist approach to language, will not provide for new ways of thinking.

In the second part, titled “Conditions of Legibility,” three chapters—“The Right Accent,” “Countries of Degraded Form,” and “Europe after Eurocentrism”—deal more directly with the twofold question of literature: its orthodoxies as well as its radical openings. Although literary studies, sometimes in collusion with area studies, has had a role in maintaining the discursive construction of Eastern Europe; and although recent debates in comparative literature have neglected to engage Eastern European traditions, literature itself—through reading and rhetoric—can help displace this construction. The postimperial difference of Eastern Europe emerges through my close readings of Conrad, Gombrowicz, and Tischner—writers whose works develop in different idioms and contexts. The three chapters focus on irony, form, and translation as rhetorical modes that foreground the critical potential of literature for interrogating persistent but inadequate categories and frames.

Opposing intelligibility to legibility in the two respective parts of the book calls attention to different kinds of knowledge: one, already constituted, depends on a set of a priori determinations; the other exposes the limits and conditions of that preconstituted knowledge. One is aligned with hermeneutics and the other with poetics. Frames of intelligibility work like congealed forms, while conditions of legibility shift focus to figuration, making possible something new.³⁶ *Form and Instability* shows Eastern Europe to be an elusive object that is, paradoxically, continually misapprehended by ever more precise names and demarcations. “Eastern Europe” is also marked by a double belatedness: on the one hand, a developmental lag attributed to the region and, on the other hand, the persistence of obsolescent frames of intelligibility maintained primarily by area studies paradigms but also by the organization of knowledge in apparently more remote disciplines. The avowed and often-repeated claim of Eastern Europe’s belatedness as a region with respect to the West thus has a silent shadow: an unavowed and overlooked belatedness built into knowledge production with respect to its object. The “instability” in this book’s title thus belongs not only to the object of analysis but also to habitual modes of apprehension. “Form,” in turn, signals something more than the shape and boundaries of an object. Because form is also a matter of relation, to unsettle one term means to de-form the other.

This book seeks modes of epistemological and aesthetic integration—into established frames of intelligibility; into Europe; into canons; into hierarchies of human value; into historical subjecthood—that would not require erasing, stabilizing, or assimilating the integrated object. It experiments with ways of thinking that might bear instability and that might be capable of keeping in view the fact of relation that underlies any form. If, as Wlad Godzich has put it, “the prevalent doxa holds that it is the Second World that collapsed, and it pays little attention to the remaining two parts, pretending that a whole amputated by a third is still a whole,” then this book would induce the missing phantom pain—or, perhaps, just a butterfly effect.³⁷

PART ONE

Frames of Intelligibility

The Passing of Eastern Europe

Area Studies and Rhetoric

The brooder whose startled gaze falls on the fragment in his hand becomes an allegorist.

WALTER BENJAMIN

The hour of truth, like the hour of death, never arrives on time, since what we call time is precisely truth's inability to coincide with itself.

PAUL DE MAN

We are all post-Soviet.

SUSAN BUCK-MORSS

“What day is it?” This question haunts the protagonist of *A Minor Apocalypse*, in which yellowed calendars, official news reports, and parade banners refuse to tell the correct date. In this 1979 novel by Tadeusz Konwicki, it might be April 1980, or July 1999, or the thirty-fifth anniversary of the People’s Republic of Poland. It’s the end of the world, but no one knows how long it will take to end. In the novel, this unhinged temporality is a mark of doom more foreboding than the decay and corruption visible across Warsaw as the city prepares for a visit of Soviet officials. Alongside an expiring Poland, “the Ukraine is dying, Lithuania is in the throes of agony, Belorussia is breathing its last” in protracted torment.¹ Knowing what day it is might lend at least some meaning to the protagonist’s own suicide, scheduled to take place that same evening. Not only Poland but the entire European Second World is suspended in an eternal present, disconnected from the world, and impossible to render intelligible through available historical narratives.

A Minor Apocalypse is a fragment from the past that—to paraphrase Walter Benjamin—here becomes an allegory. For in the realm

of knowledge production, too, telling what day it is has been of prime importance, as so many temporal terms (timeliness, belatedness, backwardness, novelty, nonsynchrony) have marked the efforts to apprehend a region in transition. With the novel as backdrop, this chapter centers on ways of thinking about Eastern Europe that either emerge or become open to scrutiny in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The very name of this region and its status as a coherent object of inquiry have been called into question in the course of recent changes, whose outward signs include the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the transitions to political liberalism and capitalism, the eastward expansion of the European Union, and Russia's reassertion of control over parts of its former domain. A variety of paradigms (area studies, transitology, postcolonialism, feminism, and postsocialism) and a host of proper names (East Central Europe, Central Europe, Newly Independent States, Eurasia, New Europe, the Other Europe, the borderlands, and the Bloodlands) have been mobilized in an attempt to grasp the condition of the region.² But if it goes without saying that new knowledge about the region must come to reflect its new historical situation, it is less certain what counts as knowledge adequate to its object. In what terms and in reference to which existing narratives might that condition be recognized and rendered meaningful? In what, indeed, might the novelty of this condition be said to consist, and what new languages might need to be invented?

In the course of the recent attempts to apprehend Eastern Europe's new historical situation, then, both the fixity of Eastern Europe as a pregiven context and stable concept on the one hand and the presumption of coincidence between language and referent on the other hand have undergone a disruption. The full significance of the question ("What day is it?") is possible to gauge only by placing in full view the rhetorical dimension of language. Konwicki's *A Minor Apocalypse* is the staging of this dimension. The apocalypse in the novel's title—an ambivalent figure of destruction and renewal, of unveiling a hidden truth or instituting a new one—is a pretext for my deliberate reading of the novel as an allegory because allegory, as Benjamin writes, works by "the wrenching of things from their familiar contexts."³ And in allegory as in irony, de Man reminds us, "the relationship between sign and meaning is discontinuous" and shown to be thus.⁴ As I attend to various tropes suggested by Konwicki's novel—not only apocalypse but also allegory, allusion, and most importantly irony—the new historical situation of post-Soviet Eastern Europe will itself undergo

estrangement: it will become a matter of language in its coimplication with knowledge production. As a question of *currency*, moreover, the question of reimagining Eastern Europe in the present will also entail the double question of exchange value (on the market of ideas) and of timeliness. Just as in the economic and political registers reforms have been directed at drawing Eastern Europe out of its imputed backwardness and isolation from the West, so in the discursive and epistemological registers the manifest task has been to update the terms in which we think about this object in transition. But successful inscription into the global, which is the ostensible goal of any such updating, also contains an irreducible ambivalence: it signals liberation and finally grants the region visibility by forging—in the double sense of establishing *and* simulating—its continuity with the rest of the world, while at the same time it subsumes it to an order not of its own making.⁵

In this task of rethinking Eastern Europe, timeliness—keeping up with the course of history—has been put in the service, precisely, of furthering the economic-institutional task of expediting empirical change. In most recent thinking about Eastern Europe, in other words, the timeliness of scholarly discourses has been measured either by their pragmatic usefulness or by their ability to record accurately the signs of change, be it progress or regress. But the performative and instrumental aspects of these discourses, the fact that they not merely describe but also participate in instituting change, remain outside scrutiny—not because these aspects are hidden or repressed but, on the contrary, because they are seen as natural components of what counts as useful knowledge. The still-prevalent paradigm of area studies, which has long depended on positivist models, continues to organize much of the putatively new work on the region. As Rey Chow reminds us, “Area studies as a mode of knowledge production is, strictly speaking, military in its origins,” following as it does upon the capacity to designate and target discrete areas of the world.⁶ The military and political-economic aims have gone hand in hand with the epistemological and disciplinary formations produced to satisfy these aims. For H. D. Harootunian and Masao Miyoshi, the area studies paradigm is also a continuation and correlate of earlier imperial practice of extracting raw materials and cheap labor. Taking its cue from early ethnographic models, research in area studies has “meant extracting from the field the raw material of pure facticity. . . . Since this field was on the outside, it was seen simply as the domain of fact, the object of analysis that would be carried out elsewhere, in the inside.”⁷ Far from a coherent interdisciplinary

paradigm, area studies also reinforces disciplinary boundaries by privileging positivist approaches and by subordinating the study of cultures and languages to the social sciences.

Two related modes of thinking have the potential for interrupting both the continued influence of area studies and the continuity between language and world that area studies approaches presume. The first mode of thinking is literature, the second—critique. Both literature and critique have been accorded a minimal presence in area studies, where literary texts have served as supplementary sources of cultural and historical information, while critique would only obstruct unproblematic transmission of such information. As modes of thinking, literature and critique foreground the rhetorical dimension of language. They call attention to what is not immediately discernible and to the politics of knowledge production itself. The aim, then, is to reflect on the paradoxical inadequacy of purely positivist methodologies for apprehending Eastern Europe as an object of inquiry and to explore the potential of literature and critique for transcending their limitations.

The problem of belatedness of knowledge with respect to the world appears differently here than it does in modes of thinking that take language to be fully transparent and merely instrumental. That view of language, which conceives of knowledge as a mode of mimetic representation, also implies an organic temporality in which knowledge is in close synchrony with its object.⁸ But attention to rhetoric, as de Man and Benjamin will help elucidate, destroys such an organic conception of the relation between language, knowledge, and temporality. Instead of placing value on closing any perceptible gap between knowledge and world through ever more accurate empirical research, the question becomes, as Paul Bové has put it in a different context, how *not* to lose oneself in the pursuit of “a rapidly accelerating contemporaneity.”⁹ Belatedness in knowledge production, from this perspective, cannot be avoided by keeping up with the times all the more. Instead, belatedness besets thought that is too closely attuned to the moment and thus cannot anticipate its own effects.

In response, and in contrast, to the threat of belatedness inherent in the pursuit of timely knowledge through methods that ignore the non-transparency and nonidentity of language, critique—and with it literature—is untimely. As Wendy Brown has reminded us, critique is always accused of coming at the wrong time, taking up time, and getting in the way of efficiency. Against research that presents itself as efficient and well timed, then, critique is often badly timed—an extra thing, a

supplement. This, however, is precisely its value: its role is “to contest settled accounts of what time it is, what the times are,” and “to grasp the times by thinking against the times. . . . Untimely critique insists on alternative possibilities and perspectives in a seemingly closed political and epistemological universe.”¹⁰ It offers a remedy to belatedness by taking as the point of departure the fundamental nonsynchrony between knowledge and its object.

This chapter insists on alternative possibilities and perspectives opened up by critique and by literature as a mode of knowledge without, at the same time, taking for granted a sharp divide between humanistic and social scientific modes of thought. Instead of assigning in advance the positive value of untimeliness to one side while charging the other with mere belatedness or naive punctuality, Konwicki’s novel will serve as the ground of any such judgment as it helps determine the adequacy of new discourses about Eastern Europe. A focus on the rhetorical dimension of language will guide both the reading of the novel and the discussion of disciplinary-epistemological questions.

ALLEGORY AND HISTORY

A Minor Apocalypse presents a world disfigured by state socialism and Soviet control: a milk bar serves spoiled milk, water and gas get shut off without warning, and even dilapidated buildings are policed for trespassers. The triumphant slogan “Zbudowaliśmy socjalizm!”—“We have built socialism!”—is everywhere: one, made of flower wreaths on the Vistula river, falls apart as the exclamation point floats away; another one, with letters made of colorful lightbulbs, looks as if it’s bleeding. And the restaurant Paradyz, where some of the story takes place, is designed in the style of “ruined-modern. That means that its architecture and interior decoration were up to world standards, but at the same time it made you think of some old shanty about to collapse. Besides, that’s the style of our entire society. As if all these people were awaiting an impending relocation to a new country.”¹¹

But it is ethical ruin—not simply the prevalence of corruption but the collapse of the very distinction between the righteous and the compromised—that the novel is most directly concerned with. The plot, as absurd as the setting, follows an aging dissident writer on his way to his “private Golgotha”: Tadeusz the hero has agreed to set himself on fire in an act of public protest that same evening, in front of television

cameras and visiting Soviet dignitaries. But the desperate act may be intended only to salvage the very idea of protest, as opposition intellectuals, writers, and artists do not figure here as guardians of national conscience or arbiters of political virtue but are, indeed, the most prominent targets of criticism. Reflecting on this ethical ruin, the novel is also full of quasi-philosophical dilemmas and circular logic familiar from the socialist condition: “And so now the regime has its own art,” someone philosophizes. “The regime is self-sufficient. It creates reality and reflects it in art.”¹² “Then why aren’t we free?” someone else asks. “Have we taken ourselves prisoner and are keeping ourselves behind bars?” “That’s it. We’ve given the oppressor the slip. We’ve outwitted him. We are free because we have imposed our own slavery.”¹³

Giving expression to such distorted reasoning of the late socialist period, *A Minor Apocalypse* seems at first glance to be a mere artifact of the past, in both its thematic and its formal aspects. Apparently fixed in its historical location, it simultaneously represents and belongs to a particular moment. The novel shows so little sense of the overturning that the next decade would bring—from the Solidarity strikes to the long-awaited end of the Cold War—that a blurb on the cover of its 1984 English translation mistook it for a sign of impending doom: “Everything in this wrenching, gruesomely compelling novel indicates that life in that part of the world will get worse.”¹⁴ In formal terms, too, *A Minor Apocalypse* is marked by the passage of time, as its unmistakably satirical tone seals it within that moment all the more firmly—because satire, as conventional wisdom about Soviet-era Eastern Europe literatures will tell us, is a mode that belongs to politically resistant and thus context-specific writing. The gasoline needed for the protagonist’s protest suicide must be purchased with state-issued ration cards; imported Swedish matches are procured at a special foreign-currency store, because domestic ones are too unreliable; and the subversives in charge of the operation hand the would-be martyr a manual on self-immolation, based on extensive experience in the field. The fact that such bleak humor may no longer amuse testifies all the more to the novel’s outdatedness. No longer speaking to a living reality, the novel is a satire without an object, like a reflection in a fun-house mirror that persists even after no one is standing before it. Now, after the collapse of state socialism, it can be expected to elicit only polite curiosity, at best a sense of déjà vu, and seems merely to confirm what we already know from other sources.

And yet, although *A Minor Apocalypse* appears to be nothing but a fragment of the past, I want to read it as something more than a

representation—distorted and veiled as it may be—of a particular, datable historical situation. Its usual frame of intelligibility includes Konwicki's own political evolution, shifting from his participation in the Polish Home Army's anti-Nazi and anti-Soviet armed resistance during World War II, to his membership in the Communist Party just after the war, to his repudiation of the Party after the disillusionment occasioned by the violent suppression of the 1956 workers' strikes in Poznań. In this account, *A Minor Apocalypse* would be the outcome of yet another disillusionment, this time with the politically exhausted opposition circles.¹⁵ Without denying biography and history, how might the novel be made to speak beyond its own proper moment? This in turn raises the double question of readability and historicity—of the conditions of the novel's legibility in the post-Soviet present. In its rhetorical dimension—in the way in which it foregrounds the problem of (figurative) language and its relation to truth—the novel speaks in our present as an allegory of the search for truth.

Such a reading—which appears to stray from the immediate, referential context of the novel—is allegorical in multiple senses. In its Greek etymology, *allegory* means “speaking otherwise,” but more precisely it is a trope that turns the phenomenal world into abstractions and converts temporally extended narratives into fixed, punctual concepts.¹⁶ Allegorical reading—although often denounced as static and artificial, and charged with violating the material and referential specificity of a text—has served the important function of producing new meanings through a certain destruction of what is. Whether in Saint Paul's rereadings of Jewish scriptures that made them accessible to new converts to Christianity, or in the purging of the Song of Songs of its erotic denotations in order to conform it to church doctrine, allegory has been a vehicle of epistemic translation in the course of historical change.

Allegory's destructiveness provoked mixed responses from two of the twentieth century's most astute thinkers. For Erich Auerbach, who went to great lengths to delineate the competing concept of *figura*, allegory's apparent denial of the concrete materiality of the “original” text or event was a source of anxiety. Allegory without the destructiveness of abstraction, *figura* is “the creative, formative principle, change amid the enduring essence, the shades of meaning between copy and archetype.”¹⁷ *Figura* thus “differs from most of the allegorical forms known to us by the historicity both of the sign and what it signifies.”¹⁸ Auerbach's insistence that a text or an object from the past can survive intact

and persist (fully present in its future appropriation or resignification) may well be explained by the context of his writing: from the vantage point of Istanbul in 1944, he is looking at the wartime destruction of European culture, of which so little appeared to survive. Benjamin, however—writing somewhat earlier—is looking not only toward the impending war but also at the ruination already accomplished by capital. For him allegory is a more ambivalent trope. In “Central Park,” a series of enigmatic fragments on commodity fetishism, historical experience, and newness, there are two ways in which allegory appears as more than a merely destructive agent of abstraction.¹⁹ First, it has a redemptive dimension. “That which the allegorical intention has fixed upon is sundered from the customary contexts of life,” Benjamin writes. “It is at once shattered and preserved.”²⁰ Allegory preserves precisely by shattering; paradoxically, it rescues objects from oblivion by severing them from the seemingly natural meanings to which they are usually attached. Second, for Benjamin allegory is suitable for a time that is ruled, in any case and far more insidiously, by the abstraction of the market. Whatever wreckage allegory effects by the substitution of concepts for organic things and by “the extinguishing of appearance,” it is also certain that “the devaluation of the world of things in allegory is surpassed within the world of things itself by the commodity.”²¹ Allegory does indeed cause a kind of demolition, Benjamin concedes. But that is nothing compared to the equally abstract but much more destructive devaluation of the real world caused by the commodity and by the relations of exchange it entails. Allegory, in other words, is at least a transparent enough device to foreground abstraction; the commodity conceals it.

It is through *this* sense of allegory that *A Minor Apocalypse* demands to be read: as an “image of petrified unrest” rather than as a placid artifact of the past rendered mute by the passage of time and by objective historical change.²² Here, the novel’s sensible, material realm—that is, the immediately referential context of a certain moment in Cold War history—will be neither abandoned (as Auerbach feared in the case of allegory) nor preserved intact (as he believed *figura* could do). “The brooder whose startled gaze falls on the fragment in his hand,” writes Benjamin, “becomes an allegorist.”²³ The novel is such a fragment from the past torn out of its organic interrelations—which is to say, out of its apparently proper context—in order that it may become meaningful in the present. Such an allegorical reading also entails, then, at least a momentary dislocation not only from Soviet-era Poland of the late

1970s but also from literary history, which—as a mode of knowledge production—relies on what Jacques Derrida calls an “economy of the same” in order to arrest meanings through settled narratives and to accord everything its appropriate place. This reading, finally, eschews the familiar notion of national allegory, which tethers the text to its context instead of allowing the former to move.²⁴

A Minor Apocalypse itself explicitly foregrounds several rhetorical tropes: *apocalypse* as revelation of truth and destruction of an existing order; *allusion* as a form of mediated access to truth; and *allegory* as a promise of unequivocal meaning in a world set adrift by the devaluation of language itself. *Irony*, finally—the figure of radical uncertainty—will turn out, paradoxically, to be the only authentic condition of, and relation to, truth. One of the central problems that emerge through such a rhetorical reading of the novel is the double question of access to truth and of the adequation of language to reality. Even as *A Minor Apocalypse* both elicits and thematizes boredom and exhaustion, then, it will tell us about novelty and invention, both within the realm of history and in the languages meant to apprehend history. Read, finally, as a useful allegory for the formation and lives of scholarly fields, it will also tell us about the limits of radical breaks—historical as much as epistemological.

DEATH AND THE APPEARANCE OF NEWNESS

The protagonist of *A Minor Apocalypse*, named Tadeusz just like its author, is an aging writer depressed about the pervasive atmosphere of decay. He wakes up contemplating his own end but is interrupted by the arrival of two fellow writers, Hubert and Rysio, who visit whenever it's time to take a political stand. “Something to sign?” Tadeusz asks, expecting yet another petition and ready to oblige.²⁵ But this time they want something more: for him to set himself on fire at that evening's state celebration, in the presence of Soviet visitors and television cameras. “And if I don't do it?” he ventures a protest, only to hear: “Then you'll go living the way you've lived till now.”²⁶ As Tadeusz makes his way through the city to the appointed place and time, with a canister of gasoline and a box of matches in hand, the only thing that drives the narrative is the question of whether he will go through with the assignment. Yet even that suspense gradually vanishes under a barrage of absurd events and inconclusive epiphanies. Wandering through

the city, Tadeusz searches for clues to the possible meaningfulness of the sacrifice he has been asked to perform. Now that romantic ideals of martyrdom for the sake of the nation have been perverted beyond recognition, in the name of what good, of what truth, might his death make sense? What difference might it make?

As Benjamin writes in “Central Park,” “For people as they are now, there is only one radical novelty—and always the same one: death.”²⁷ With obsolescence as a close correlate, death participates in the economy of epistemic exchange, which propels history by forging the appearance of the new. In the vision of history as a continual movement through the succession of ever-new conditions, the production of historical change resembles commodity production, in which “the product’s novelty”—much like the newness of the historical event—“(as a stimulant to demand) takes on a significance hitherto unknown; in mass-production the ever-selfsame manifests itself overtly for the first time.”²⁸ In a situation where boredom and fashion collaborate to propel epistemic-economic exchange, death is necessary to institute the appearance of something new because it itself appears as the only absolute novelty.

In *A Minor Apocalypse*, this insight is precisely what goes missing from the logic that guides the underground intellectuals’ decision to stage the spectacle: for them, the protagonist’s death—the perfect alignment of symbolic meanings with sensible reality—is supposed to bring about the end of this ruined world by awakening its inhabitants from their nightmare and, by making the news, to force the outside world to take notice. The right kind of death would bring about an apocalypse—a revelation of truth. Put in Benjamin’s terms, death for them has only a use value—the potential for authentic efficacy, as if it were possible to isolate it from the circuit of epistemic-historical exchange within which it finds its meaning and within which this meaning is blunted in turn. If Rysio and Hubert’s jaded attitude, and their weariness with their self-appointed task of resisting the regime, suggest that they may not fully believe in effecting actual change this time around—“Someone has to do it,” they tell Tadeusz, in lieu of a better reason for choosing him—they still have faith in the efficacy of (the right kind of) death (at some point). For Tadeusz, however, the problem assumes central importance. He does not take it on faith that a death turned into a public event—if only carried out under the right circumstances—can institute absolute novelty independently of the logic of exchange. Even as he looks for a guarantee that the end of his own private world might

bring about the definitive end of the dying Soviet world, he recognizes the illusory dimension of the promise of death-as-novelty.

What—Tadeusz must know—is the relation between the death of a single person and the end of a particular world? An old man he asks for guidance—an ailing veteran of anti-Nazi and anti-Soviet resistance and now a member of the underground—only confirms his suspicion of “the ever-always-the-same” aspect of history hidden beneath the appearance of the new. Tadeusz is already convinced that the world as such cannot die: “Many generations have thought that the world was dying,” he tells the old man, “but it was only *their* world which was dying.” As far as he’s concerned, the world goes on regardless of human death. The old man, however, goes a step further: “But if the world doesn’t die, then it must live off something,” he responds. “It needs human death.”²⁹ The world is not indifferent to human death, as Tadeusz was prepared to accept; paradoxically, it *requires* human death and feeds on it to extend its own life—that is, to maintain the appearance of movement and to conceal its own stasis.

The recognition that there is no coincidence—either ontological or causal—between the death of an individual and the end of a world is coupled with a general devaluation of death, a devaluation that can take place only if death is admitted to have exchange value. In the novel, any faith in the uniqueness and force of death-as-event is undermined by its omnipresence and overuse, in suicides already attempted or carried out by others, whether simulated or real. A politically subversive film—suggestively entitled *The Transfusion*—ends with the hero jumping out the window. Someone’s friend burned himself too, outside the Kremlin, and “many [other] people have done it.”³⁰ “Before me,” Tadeusz reflects, “Buddhist monks, a certain Czech, and some Lithuanians have walked the same path to the pyre.”³¹ Even his torture by the secret police is not a catastrophic event but a repetition of other torture scenes, a gesture without effect. As Tadeusz tells his interrogator, “I’ve had the pleasure of meeting with the Gestapo, the NKVD, and with the good old prewar Polish police.” The thug now before him is merely reciting the familiar script, and the prisoner is “seized by a perverse, vengeful sense of satisfaction at seeing this poor fool playing his old-fashioned game for his own sake, for his colleagues, and for my colleagues, who had thrust me out on the road to saintliness.”³²

Yet the question of the efficacy of death still worries the protagonist, and not only because he needs to believe that his own public suicide will have some meaning. More crucially, it entails the question of access to

truth. The appearance of death as the only radical novelty rests on the fact that it is irrevocable and undeniable—and, thus, fundamentally true. The truthfulness and hence the allure of death are related to the fact that it appears to function as a solid ground and thus to undergird the otherwise-illusory world of both objects and concepts, which are ruled, respectively, by the logic of the commodity and of allegory and which are equally susceptible to the logic of exchange. Rhetorically, death thus works as a promise of truth because it appears as a guarantee of absolute, ultimate reference. But, emptied out of singularity and subject to repetition as it proves to be in the novel, even death does not guarantee absolute novelty. (It is the undermining of this referential foundation by Tadeusz's persistent questioning—and by the devaluation of death generally—that gives the first hints of irony.)

The apocalypse in the novel's title places this ambivalent relation between death and truth at the center. Apocalypse is the lifting of the veil and a revelation of truth, but it is also the end of one era and the institution of a new one. It does away with an old order and founds a new one by stripping away appearances and revealing a truth—one, moreover, that may have been there all along. Apocalypse, then, is supposed to bring about an abrupt break and an absolute end, but the novelty of the revealed truth (or the cause of the break) is impossible to determine. The only certainty is that the *newness* of the new era would consist in a changed *relation* to truth, rather than in the content of what is to be revealed.

In the novel—as in its immediate setting of late Soviet-era Eastern Europe—the changed, more direct relation to truth would mean not simply *telling* the truth, or working up the courage to pronounce it, or even separating truth from falsehood, but rather restoring the referential dimension of language—returning to it its capacity to determine meaning in a place where “everything is so double-faced” and where “evil has tapped into our ethical code and turned itself into [a new] good.”³³ This utter corruption of language is part of the broader historical context of the novel—an often noted feature of the Second World, where “the confrontation between the Communist regimes and their discursive oppositions . . . included a clash over the different claims to truth.”³⁴ Without bothering to verify their own claims to truth, however, the regimes aimed for total discursive control instead. As Miglena Nikolchina writes, “Discursive control secures the prerogative of a particular discourse to emanate reality. . . . The regime needed dissidents. The punishment of dissidents ensured the observance of the

fundamental law: ‘Thou shalt speak as thou shalt speak.’”³⁵ But this enforced alignment of human speech with the language of the regime was still not enough, as reality itself was expected to conform. In what Václav Havel called “evasive thinking,” “The word . . . [had] gained a kind of occult power to transform one reality into another.”³⁶ In philosophical discourse as in everyday life, the dislocation of language from reference is, paradoxically, a direct consequence of the efforts to close the gap between them.³⁷

In such conditions, any attempt to merely *voice* the truth is likely to fail. Just before Tadeusz and the ailing veteran of underground resistance discuss his planned suicide, the television screen in the room shows his neighbor, a certain highly placed comrade Kobiałka, ascending the podium to make a speech before Soviet and Polish officials. “Watch this! He’s going to take off his clothes!” says someone, pointing to the television screen, and it becomes clear that public disrobing is a form of protest as common, and as predictable, as self-immolation. Only the first words of Kobiałka’s address—“Comrade traitors! Comrade swine!”—are audible before the sound is turned off by the censors, and he is left visible on the screen without a sound, “delivering his mute speech, his accusation for which he had been preparing himself for the past quarter of a century, his credo formed over many sleepless nights, his confession rising in a throat parched with all the depths of humiliation.”³⁸ Kobiałka is taken away, kicking and foaming, while Tadeusz and his collaborators fall “silent for a moment, as if at the graveside of someone who had just been buried.”³⁹ The mental hospital where Kobiałka ends up is, in any case, filled with past protesters—many truth tellers reunited as if in an afterworld.

Everyone, it seems, wants to tell the truth or has one to reveal. If public protest has limited effect, then the other way of revealing the truth is literature, or writing, itself. Even Sacher—a former dignitary of the regime, once driven around in bulletproof limousines, at whose bidding the names of cities would be changed and people’s heads would fall—is now writing a memoir to tell “the truth of our times.” With the “murky, extinguished spark of fanaticism” still in his gaze, Sacher reveals his loyalties from the start by using the Russian appellation *wy* (instead of the properly Polish *Pan* or *ty*) to address Tadeusz.⁴⁰ “Was it you who threw me out of the Party?” Sacher asks. Hearing that it was rather he, Sacher, who threw Tadeusz and his friends out of the Party, the old memoir writer is unperturbed. “That could be. I’ve been getting mixed up lately,” he says and, instead of dwelling on the past, confesses

that his briefcase—one he takes everywhere, for fear of being spied on or searched by the police—contains the manuscript in which “the only truth about our times” is written. But Tadeusz scorns the old man’s confession: “I am a seeker of truth,” he responds. “I saunter around looking for [the real] truth. Open your briefcase, which used to carry death sentences. One whiff and I’ll know what sort of truth you have there.”⁴¹ Sacher, he implies, has been on the wrong side of death for too long to know the difference.

But literature written by underground intellectuals is not capable of asserting, revealing, or accessing the truth either. Not even stylistic departure from socialist realism—another failed attempt at truth making—can redeem it. The morning of his fellow writers’ visit, Tadeusz explodes at Rysio: “If you deigned to use punctuation [in your writing], then maybe one wouldn’t have to die in this country just for show.”⁴² As a writer and thus a bearer of some responsibility for the pervasive ethical ruin, Rysio—adept at churning out prize-ready books that are easy to translate in the West—is guilty of self-indulgent formalism. But it is allusion—a chief mode of intellectual protest, favored because of its apparent ability to pierce the closed system of Soviet domination and discursive control—that is subjected to the most severe ridicule in *A Minor Apocalypse*. For all its self-congratulatory cleverness, allusion turns out to maintain the coherence of the system: it promises escape by referring to that which appears to lie outside the text, and outside the system, but it does so only by drawing upon and confirming what is already known and expected. Rysio’s estranged twin, Edek, happens to be a philosopher of allusion working for the state office of censorship, where he created an autonomous Department of Allusion. “The tension caused by the hunger for truth . . . [is] artificially eliminated by a skillfully employed allusion,” Edek boasts. “For that reason, allusions should not be repressed. . . . After a certain amount of time, the receiver will prefer an allusion to truth over truth itself.”⁴³ While it promises revelation, allusion constrains knowledge within well-established circuits.

Aside from the skillful appropriation of allusion, the regime distorts history and reality by maintaining a confused temporality cut off from the rest of the world. There is no connection to the outside and no means of inserting the Soviet Second World into the continuous historical time of the larger world. Worse yet, one cannot, in the end, synchronize the unmoored temporality of the Soviet world with the rest of the planet simply by finding out, from a reliable source, what day it is.

No such reliable source, in fact, exists. Only the security police have in their possession a calendar that tells the actual date: “an *imported* calendar hanging in a safe as big as a room.”⁴⁴ Once a day, the minister of the interior enters the safe in strict secrecy, tears off a page, and burns it to ashes. No one outside the ministry knows what day it is because for years each branch of industry followed its own calendar, with productivity quotas exceeded here and deadlines unmet there, which wreaked real havoc in measuring time in general. “Maybe we could find out the right date from the West?” the protagonist offers. “I haven’t listened to Radio Free Europe for quite a while.”⁴⁵ But Kobiałka, the disrobed dignitary who is now the source of all this information, only laughs: “Maybe. . . . The West took up the challenge. They started running away when we started chasing them, and then they slowed down when we eased up. They’re exhausted, too.” So, if not from the West, “How did the calendar get into the Ministry of Security?” Tadeusz asks. But Kobiałka only shrugs. No one knows where the imported calendar is imported from, but if it comes from the West, then it certainly does not tell the date any better.⁴⁶

The West as a stable reference point against which the vertiginous dislocation of the Soviet bloc could be assessed and apprehended, then, may be a figment of propaganda like any other aspect of official discourse. Just as death cannot guarantee either definitive novelty or unequivocal truth, so “the West” cannot serve to assure that organic, linear time, undistorted by deceptive rhetoric, can be found to be running its course *somewhere*.⁴⁷ Even if Soviet regimes appeared to have “accepted Western temporal hegemony” and effectively treated it as their own standard, in the novel a reliable temporality is not to be found on either side of the Iron Curtain.⁴⁸ In this context, there are two kinds of rhetoric in play. The first is propaganda: historically specific, confined to the Soviet bloc, creating the impression that any corruption of language is due to human manipulation. The second kind of rhetoric is that proper to language in general: not historically specific or geographically confined but usually invisible, leaving us to assume the basic capacity of language to be referential. Both kinds of rhetoric are deceptive, but only one is acknowledged to be thus. Both effect a distortion in the relation of language to world, but only the first is remarked on while the second remains hidden. The difference between totalitarian and ordinary language—habitually framed through the opposition between opacity and clarity, mendacity and truthfulness, detachment from reality and perfect referentiality—is in fact a difference in the

modes of distortion specific to each and in the ethical and political values assigned to them.

In light of this realization, the problem of Soviet-era East European culture is no longer that there is no connection either to a stable outside world or to a reality hidden under falsehood; and it is no longer a question of forging such a connection at some great personal risk—whether through romantic martyrdom, literary allusion, or public disrobing. Before, it was possible to believe that all one needed was the right amount of courage exercised in the right circumstances through the right form. Now—on the other side of the realization that neither death nor the West offers a stable reference point—there can no longer be an outside as such. There can be no undistorted outside to the presumably distorted Second World. Their polar opposition is itself an effect of language.

AN ALLEGORY OF IRONY

A Minor Apocalypse, then, appears allegorical through and through. Every detail is meaningful and can be mapped directly onto an abstraction: the search for truth; the fate of the Polish nation or the entire Soviet bloc; the problem of how to emerge out of ethical ruin; the institution of historical novelty. The often-hyperbolic language and the satirical tone of the novel invite such readings all the more. Konwicki himself gestures toward a specific allegory most clearly when Tadeusz meets a Russian woman among the subversives who train him in self-immolation. The voluptuous, passionate “granddaughter of Lenin” is unlike any of the spent people Tadeusz is used to seeing. The two fall in love, and their intermittent encounters throughout the day are the only times Tadeusz feels freed of the otherwise-ubiquitous cynicism. Her name is *Nadzieźda*, which translates as *Nadzieja* in Polish and as *Hope* in English. But because (unlike in Russian or English) “*Nadzieja*” in Polish is not a proper name, she can only be an allegory for *Hope* itself. This apparently fixed meaning, however—allegorical because abstract and unequivocal at the same time—cannot hold because, as a Russian woman, she cannot signify *Hope* to a Polish man of Tadeusz’s historical situation. Russia stands for corruption and oppression; to align *Nadzieźda* the woman with *Hope* is highly ambivalent. Their love appears sincere, and her body offers a promise of genuine refuge, yet the two contradictory significations of her figure—as *Hope* and as *Russia*—cannot be reconciled and, instead, render her illegible.

This illegibility of a Hope that is also, impossibly, identified with Russia itself disrupts the allegorical scheme most definitively in *A Minor Apocalypse*, in which the guarantee of reference is already undermined by the removal of both death and the West as possible hinges that might serve to affix the Soviet world either to a world-historical time or to truth. The simple one-to-one mapping of vehicle and tenor assured by allegory, in other words—a mapping that guarantees certainty even if it does so artificially and at the cost of abstraction—is disrupted by a multiplicity of intersecting and contradictory mappings. The one-to-one adequation of the sensible reality of a woman to an abstract concept—which is to say, the possibility of unequivocal meaning assured by allegory—breaks down.

If the novel as a whole is an allegory, then it may be said to be an allegory of irony. Irony, as de Man has written, enters into discourse as soon as the possibility even of double meaning is admitted. Once uncertainty of reference is allowed into reading, the possibility of secure knowledge is undermined by a “permanent parabasis” that, henceforth, afflicts all language.⁴⁹ The more profound effect of irony—beyond introducing local difficulties of interpretation that might be contained to a single text—is that it “splits the subject into an empirical self that exists in a state of inauthenticity and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity.” But this knowledge, de Man insists, does not in turn have the redeeming effect of rendering either the subject or its language authentic.⁵⁰ Both the inauthenticity and the split are irremovable.

A Minor Apocalypse—as an allegory of irony—will permit multiple allegorizations and thus multiple uses. In the next section of this chapter, it will be an allegory of knowledge production, of the search for novelty, and of the limits of radical breaks. At the same time, the novel is also most fundamentally about irony—which “demonstrates the impossibility of our being historical”—as a constitutive condition of knowledge.⁵¹

TIMELINESS AND POSTSOCIALIST NEWNESS

To show how this lesson derived from *A Minor Apocalypse* (for allegory, even an allegory of irony, is a didactic figure) applies to the realm of knowledge production about a region once known as the Soviet bloc, one more scene from the novel offers itself as instructive. The

apocalypse in the novel's title raises the specter of a final revelation of truth or newness. But this possibility is compromised from the beginning by the way in which the protagonist was selected for his mission. Demanding an explanation, he learns that he was chosen because he was neither too famous to be sacrificed nor too obscure for his death to go unnoticed. "Your life story, your personality are perfect for this situation," his fellow dissidents tell him. "You're the one, old man."⁵² Radical newness, it turns out, can be imagined only from the starting point of a familiar, existing script; it depends on carefully negotiated recombinations of the same. This may be taken as a further sign of the ethical corruption and cynicism that pervade the world of the novel. I read it, however, as an allegory for the limits to historical change and to our attempts to account for it. Read in this way, the scene makes visible the epistemic conditions that underlie the formation of scholarly fields in response to historical change and the economy of the same within which they develop.

As Jacques Derrida argues in "Psyche: Inventions of the Other," the "economy of the same" emerges less as an *obstacle* to either producing new knowledge or accounting for novelty than as a *rule* embedded within the structure of invention itself. An invention counts as an invention not simply when it constitutes or institutes something heretofore unknown or nonexistent. On the one hand, it requires institutional recognition: "There could be no invention without status" because any invention relies on preexisting authority in order to become intelligible at all and to become intelligible *as new*.⁵³ The distinction between institutional legitimation and recognition of authentic novelty thus becomes blurred: an invention can be a genuine invention only when it is *declared* to be new. On the other hand, for something to become an invention, it must also be able to originate something in its turn and thus (to recall, for a moment, Benjamin's terms) to acquire an exchange value of its own in the market of ideas. "To invent," writes Derrida, "is to produce iterability and the machine for reproduction and simulation, in an indefinite number of copies, utilizable outside the place of invention."⁵⁴ Paradoxically, then, for something new to be recognized as such, it must also lend itself to abstraction and repetition. It must be stripped of its own singularity and made universalizable, for "if the inventor finds only a particular truth, he is but a half-inventor. . . . Universality is . . . the ideal objectivity, thus unlimited recurrence."⁵⁵

It is with a simultaneous attention to irony (which reveals the constitutive split between language and reality) and to the economy of

the same (which governs the invention of any new knowledge)—both of which are allegorized in *A Minor Apocalypse*—that recent work on Eastern Europe becomes open to critique. Critique does not entail here remarking on the shortcomings of individual works or assessing the relative adequacy of particular subfields of ongoing methodological and disciplinary transformations. It means, rather, rendering intelligible—from a certain distance and with attention to the underlying conceptions of language, knowledge, history, and temporality—the politics and effects of the production of putatively new forms of knowledge. These general reflections are not meant to suggest that recent work on the region is not valuable but rather to consider the adequacy and the newness of this knowledge production. For the economy of the same, inherent in the structure of invention, comes to mitigate any radical newness that might be produced through such epistemic procedures, still grounded as they are, on the one hand, within area studies and, on the other hand, within continuities dictated by particular disciplines themselves. Adding to Roland Barthes’s definition of critique as “the construction of the intelligibility of our own time,” Wendy Brown has noted that it requires “both close attunement to the times *and* aggressive violation of their self-conception.”⁵⁶ The relevant questions become: What are the perceptible epistemic indexes of novelty? How is the passage of the category “Eastern Europe” out of existence either hindered or enabled by recent rethinking, and what are the conditions of its dissolution?

The passing of “Eastern Europe” is not only a historical problem—of how a certain political, economic, and cultural entity may come to reorganize itself in response to, and in the course of, empirical changes in politics, economies, or cultures. It is also an epistemological and discursive problem, and as such it is marked by its own nonsynchronicity. On this register, since the mid-twentieth century, “Eastern Europe” as a category operative in Western academic institutions has been tethered to the Cold War and colonial organization of knowledge otherwise known as area studies—a kind of interdisciplinarity that nonetheless does not permit a free exchange or mutual influence among disciplines and that maintains, instead, a frozen hierarchy of knowledge whose production is subordinated to an external political and economic exigency. Such disciplines as political science and economics have been decisive in this organization of knowledge, with the study of literature playing the accessory role of propping language instruction and cultural literacy. Because of this hierarchy—aimed primarily at gathering

and producing instrumental information—and because it is rooted in supposedly objective, already given political and economic conditions, Slavic studies continues to be marked by a residual positivism. Regardless of discipline, it treats language as fully transparent and adequate to reality.

One consequence of the area studies paradigm is that knowledge about Eastern Europe has tended to be produced in direct response to and with explicit fidelity to empirical developments, practical dilemmas, and political crises. In the aftermath of 1989, only the subfield of transitology, itself brand-new and involved most directly in following the unfolding political, economic, and institutional transformations, retained that unproblematic self-evidence while other disciplinary approaches responded more directly to the *epistemological* opening brought on by the fall of the Soviet Union.⁵⁷ For, however momentarily, the post-1989 transitions laid bare this constitutive belatedness of area studies—in the neutral sense of belatedness, of knowledge coming *after* its object, in which basic categories of inquiry appear as given and dictated by the world itself. The temporary disruption of stable forms of political, economic, and social organization in the suddenly former Soviet bloc, in other words, foregrounded the need for new methodologies and languages that would be adequate to the task of apprehending emergent phenomena. At the same time, this has been an ambivalent and partial opening at best. Any novel approach would be tempered by the need for a given that, as Wład Godzich has argued, is at the basis of any disciplinary (trans)formation. That which is thought to be “given” serves to stabilize disciplines, especially ones undergoing a crisis, by positing a stable ground of knowledge as distinct from that which may then safely be shown to be “constructed.” In light of this insight, transitology and the continued centrality of the social sciences in the study of the region more generally work to counterbalance the more critical tendencies that, if allowed to proceed unchecked, might threaten to dismantle the entire system.⁵⁸

It is in these conditions that the need for new ways of thinking about the newly former Soviet bloc rose to the status of an important problem.⁵⁹ The introduction of “gender” and “women” as categories of analysis into Slavic studies is one example of such promotion of epistemological and even political priorities over strictly positivist ones. At the same time, it is also an instructive case in which the persistent, constitutive belatedness embedded within area studies—a belatedness that, paradoxically, appears to its practitioners as perfect timeliness—is

revealed. After 1989, a consensus slowly emerged that the time had come to attend to gender issues in the region.⁶⁰ In this way, women's and gender studies approaches from other areas of the academy were coming to influence Slavic studies and brought with them the potential for an explicitly critical, rather than mimetic, model of knowledge production, one that would rely on positing a theoretical frame warranted not by putatively empirical reality but by a priori political or epistemological commitments. Yet the necessity of this new work was primarily justified not by a feminist or any other explicitly liberatory commitment but by the apparently sudden emergence of "women" as important social actors in the region after 1989. Oblivious to the way in which their pursuit of timeliness resulted in actual belatedness, scholars investigating this "new" problematic were confronted with the fact that area studies had failed to keep up with the world after all—that it had failed to grasp the times despite (or perhaps because of) having kept such a close watch over history.⁶¹ This example reminds us that historical newness is something distinct from epistemological newness because the paradoxical temporality of the gender question in Slavic studies has put in plain view the fact of a more general separation of this organization of knowledge from reality.

Ambivalent and partial as such openings toward self-reflexivity may be, however, it is precisely here that the passing of area studies itself—as a dominant paradigm that produces and maintains the category "Eastern Europe," albeit under renovated toponyms—must be tracked.⁶² Postcolonial studies, in this context, provides a model of a successful rerouting of area studies paradigms concerned with other parts of the non-Western world into a self-consciously critical, even oppositional, paradigm. In light of this postcolonial precedent, *postsocialism* has been proffered as a parallel term that might help inaugurate new research agendas, in anthropology in particular, while postcolonial theory, as well as cultural studies approaches more generally, has been experimented with in the humanities. To return to Derrida's reflections on the economy of invention, these two approaches to the historically new condition of the former Soviet world—postsocialism and postcolonialism—have endeavored to inscribe it into a continuous relation with the rest of the world and thus to forge new meanings—precisely by relying, to an important extent, on the inventiveness, and thus on the institutional status and the reproducibility, of postcolonial studies.

The languages borrowed in the process have not been used uncritically. Debates over their accuracy and applicability have reached

mainstream academia in the United States as well as public and academic discourses in the countries of the region.⁶³ As Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery write in their illuminating piece on the intersections of the postcolonial and the postsocialist,

Over time, “postsocialism” too came to signify a critical standpoint, in several senses: critical of the socialist past and of possible socialist futures; critical of the present as neoliberal verities about transition, markets, and democracy were being imposed upon former socialist spaces; and critical of the possibilities for knowledge as shaped by Cold War institutions. Here, postsocialist studies began to converge somewhat with the agenda of postcolonial studies. Just as postcoloniality had become a critical perspective on the colonial present, postsocialism could become a similarly critical standpoint on the continuing social and spatial effects of Cold War power and knowledge (such as in the remaking of markets, property rights, democratic institutions, workplaces, consumption, families, gender/sexual relations, or communities). Although postcolonial scholars have focused more on questions of epistemology than have postsocialist scholars, broader areas of similarity make our posts comparable enough to conceive of a traffic in ideas between them.⁶⁴

Postsocialist anthropology, thus, positions itself as “the necessary *corrective* to the deficits of ‘transitology’”—it is attentive to “human” activities and to “real people and their social practices,” in distinction from the abstract models and statistical generalizations of political science and economics.⁶⁵ Its criticality is attenuated, however, by internal disciplinary assumptions and commitments, in which language is basically stable and transparent so that “real people” can be reliably accessed as native informants, in principle legible and representative of their context. In the humanities, “postsocialism” as a critical possibility has been much less in circulation, while the old-new postcolonial vocabularies of “colonizer and colonized” or “hybridity” have gained a foothold and spurred often productive (but sometimes merely reductive) rereadings of familiar texts and settled histories.⁶⁶

These new fields of inquiry have not escaped the paradox of invention that Derrida implicitly identifies: on the one hand, the reliance on the economy of the same, sometimes fully avowed and sometimes unnoticed;⁶⁷ and, on the other hand, the conflation of novelty with alterity—the sense that it is enough to use a new language, to apply or develop new narratives, in order to account for the otherness of this new historical moment and to institute genuinely new modes of knowledge. They have also not been able

to maintain in view the separation of language and knowledge from reality revealed by irony. In these pursuits of new knowledge, the aim has been to *close* the gap between knowledge and reality—a gap that appears to have resulted from empirical change (the lifting of censorship and thus the freedom to pursue the truth) but that was there, invisible, all along—and to close this gap through ever more timely studies “on the ground” and through ever more precise articulations. Any momentary glimpses of the inadequation of knowledge to reality are taken to result from imperfect formulations or methodologies, rather than from a condition fundamental to language. The difference between these two perspectives on knowledge production may be compared to the difference between two notions of irony. The more common notion of knowledge production, which makes it possible to isolate irony and to locate it in particular texts or even in specific places within texts—and thus makes it possible to speak of *an* irony—is relatively reassuring. Even as it allows for the failure of any particular concept, model, study, or approach, the assumption that it is *in principle* both necessary and possible to produce more perfect ones is not itself in question. In this view shared by positivist modes of knowledge production regardless of discipline, failure is always localizable and correctible. In contrast, de Man’s—and, it must be said, Konwicki’s—notion of irony does not admit an article and, therefore, cannot be located or contained, even temporarily. It afflicts all language and knowledge. The only way to remedy it is to allow it in.

The fundamental insight of *A Minor Apocalypse* as it applies to knowledge in general—the recognition of the permanent separation of language from “truth”—is, therefore, on a different register than that of a *corrective* to newly produced knowledge about the region. It goes beyond even disciplinary openings to reorganize actually existing constellations of knowledge production because it shows limits of any rethinking that might be carried out in such disciplinary—and thus institutional—contexts. One particular limit may be glimpsed from within the novel itself: if the protagonist were able to look at the state of Slavic studies in the United States in the first decade of the twenty-first century, he would see a reflection of much the same world as that found in the novel itself. He would certainly keep on asking if anyone happened to know the correct date: Russian is still the dominant language; if for no better reason than the self-perpetuating logic of institutional associations, Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Belarus are still detached from the rest of the world, apparently fated to continue as Russian dominions; and Konwicki’s own novel is readable only as a

satire of a long-past world. It is readable as yet another work of literature heroic enough to have defied the censors—in its time.

If one wants an accurate reflection of the post-1989 “revolutions” in Eastern Europe, then either area studies does not offer such a view or the compromised view it does offer captures something of the truth after all. The fundamental misprision of “Eastern Europe” by modes of knowledge produced about it—a misprision exacerbated and laid bare in the course of post-1989 transitions but not confined to that moment—does not reflect an essential instability of “Eastern Europe” in itself. This instability belongs, instead, to existing modes and organization of knowledge. Literature and critique, in this particular case but with consequences for knowledge production in general, help resist such tendencies toward enclosure.

Strategies of Accession

Europe and Deixis

Once, I was an Eastern European; then I was promoted to the rank of Central European. . . . Then a few months ago, I became a New European. But before I had the chance to get used to this status. . . . I have now become a non-core European. . . . In our town, this is how we become cosmopolitans.

PÉTER ESTERHÁZY

Dreams reach here a little used.

ANDRZEJ STASIUK

At stake in becoming European is becoming intelligible. But Europe is a matter of language—a matter of discourse shaped by particular histories and practices of self-identification, and thus also a matter of utterance and deixis. Becoming European means coming to inhabit this language authentically, without—to risk a metaphor—a perceptible foreign accent.

This proposition is distinct from the familiar statement that Europe's boundaries, be they geographic or cultural, are notoriously unstable. Historians of the idea of Europe readily acknowledge this indeterminacy of European identity—virtually the only constant in the array of genealogies that trace the idea of Europe from its mythical or philosophical foundations to its contemporary elaborations. A more implicit but equally persistent point of agreement is that, whatever Europe may or may not be, it is most recognizably itself in the northwestern part of the continent. Habitually identified with the very essence of Europe, the mutual implication of developments such as the modern nation-state, capitalism, secularism, political and economic liberalism, Enlightenment, and overseas colonial expansion serves to delineate its geography without the need to enumerate precisely who counts as European. As a

philosophical idea, finally, Europe is infinitely elastic; it is marked by a unique capacity “of relating in a negative fashion to [itself] and the ensuing openness to all others,” which entails the ability not merely to incorporate but also to anticipate and even to welcome any critique that might appear to undermine it.¹

The instability and openness are balanced and secured, however, by the hermetic stability of the deictic “we” from within Europe.² This becomes discernible when we consider what happens when an Eastern European is confronted with this avowedly open, indeterminate idea of Europe: initial self-recognition and seamless identification give way first to uncertainty and then to the realization that, after all, “Europe” does not include Eastern Europe unless the latter is explicitly invoked. It turns out that the slippage and openness characteristic of the idea of Europe can be celebrated only from within it, while those already, implicitly included in the deictic “we” are exempt from the obligation to make explicit its precise referent. “The identity of ‘Europe’ has always been uncertain and imprecise,” writes Anthony Pagden, but Europeans have also “persistently described themselves, usually when faced with cultures they found indescribably alien, to be not merely British or German or Spanish but also European.”³ And, as Umberto Eco has put it, the common feeling that “makes the behavior and taste of someone from France, Spain, or Germany seem more familiar to us than those of others” holds true “even for the least cultivated of us Europeans.”⁴ The deictic nature of “Europe” helps to understand why, if Europe is supposed to have porous boundaries, it nonetheless appears to outsiders as quite self-certain and well guarded. The inside-outside boundary is etched in discourses about Europe much more insidiously by acts of enunciation than by the assignation of borders and proper names.

Eastern Europe’s accession to Europe—a cultural, historical, and above all discursive problem whose temporal and epistemological parameters exceed the more punctual event of some Eastern European states’ accession to the institutional apparatus of the European Union—exposes and runs against this deictic aspect of European identity. Accession to the European Union concerns the adoption of legal norms and fiscal policies; it can be dated to the two enlargement treaties of 2004 and 2007 and to the pre-enlargement proceedings that began soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall; its progress can be measured, finally, by economic indices, cross-border mobility, or increased exchanges across the former Iron Curtain. Accession to *Europe*, however, is something of a different order, temporal as much as cultural.

It is a problem of discursivity, one for which no adequate language exists. Eastern European countries' accession to Europe is thus a matter of deixis—not an objective struggle over the name and boundaries of Europe, but a matter of coming to inhabit it and to speak for it from within.

What, precisely, constitutes the barrier in this latter kind of accession—beyond the construction of Eastern Europe as backward with respect to Europe and, thus, as located in a different time—will emerge from recent reflections by Western European intellectuals on the bases of future European unity, and from Eastern European writers' own attempts to assert Europeanness through certain acts of cultural translation that, paradoxically, foreground this barrier the more they endeavor to overcome it. The works central to this chapter, Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel *In Desert and Wilderness* (1911) and Ryszard Kapuściński's essays in *The Other* (2006), are two such moments of failed cultural translation—moments when something like a deictic language first of imperial, and then of postimperial, Europe reveals itself at the same time as it resists full appropriation. The first work is a children's novel, set in the 1880s in British colonial Sudan and Egypt, in which a Polish boy named Staś performs admirable acts ranging from rescuing an elephant to converting Africans to Christianity. The second work is a small collection of lectures on cultural, religious, and racial otherness given by a journalist who was Poland's first foreign correspondent working in the Third World. Culled from opposing ends of the twentieth century—the first colonial, the second avowedly postcolonial and postimperial—Sienkiewicz's and Kapuściński's texts betray them as impostors who adopt European speech without being able to either completely account for or fully assume the European identity inscribed in that speech. Yet even as they fail to assert belonging within Europe, their very failure reveals something that otherwise goes unnoticed and disavowed: the persistence, and the vital role, of colonial discourses and histories in acts of European self-identification across the twentieth century.

The unintended outcome of these flawed translations is to show that Western European colonialism is not simply a fact of the past that concerns only the former imperial powers but also an uncertain inheritance that all Europeans, including the newly included, are compelled to speak for.⁵ Through rhetorical and affective strategies aimed at erasing or renegotiating the line drawn within the continent of Europe by distinct memories of and relations to empire, Sienkiewicz and Kapuściński have attempted to

inscribe Eastern Europe within Europe by sharing in that which (Western) Europeans have “exploited, imported, and translated” in their own colonial encounters.⁶ The success of the ongoing transition into the West depends in part on the eventual success of this translation. The “not yet” of the transition, in other words, rests on the “not quite” of the translation—a translation through which the deictic “we, here, now” of the European present might come to include those who do not share the same historical memory.

Bringing this to light foregrounds the subjective dimension of the process of accession to Europe, which goes beyond empirical indices of progress and development and beyond the capacity to comply with institutional norms. It will also call attention to the conceptual and discursive deficit that mars the process of European enlargement after 1989. In what language, in what common terms, might the whole of Europe be accurately captured? For the time being, there are only borrowed, partial languages, provisional and imperfect. And because the very process that reveals this deficit is commonly thought to be transitional, a temporary matter of adjustment, the deficit itself goes unnoticed.

AN INARTICULABLE EUROPEAN PRESENT

Speaking in 1990 about the problem of European identity, Jacques Derrida asks: “Is there a completely new ‘today’ of Europe beyond all the exhausted programs of *Eurocentrism* and *anti-Eurocentrism*, these exhausting yet unforgettable programs?”⁷ If it is difficult to assert the promise of this moment in Europe’s history or to find sure signs of renewal, that is because, he notes,

Old Europe seems to have exhausted all the possibilities of discourse and counter-discourse about its own identification. Dialectic in all its essential forms, including those that comprehend and entail anti-dialectic, has always been in the service of this autobiography of Europe, even when it took on the appearance of a confession. For avowal, guilt, and self-accusation no more escape this old program than does the celebration of the self.⁸

Poised between a simultaneous opening and closing, between the demolition of the Berlin Wall and the building of a Fortress Europe, the “today” in Derrida’s question calls for a redefinition of European identity—even as the dangers of identity have been made apparent in every previous attempt at such redefinition in Europe’s history.

It is not at all certain here, in *The Other Heading*, in what relation Eastern Europe might stand to Western Europe—whether Eastern Europe is already included in this “Europe” putting itself into question and whether it is taking part in this “today,” sharing in its exhaustion and renewal; or if it serves, instead, to prompt this opening from the outside. If the year 1990 points to the latter—this year, just after the fall of the Berlin Wall, must be, after all, what makes this present moment significant as a point of departure toward something new—then Derrida also takes care *not* to ground this new crisis of identity by reference to a place, a time, or a particular subject. “What is proper to a culture is not to be identical to itself,” he writes, “not to be able to identify itself, to be able to say ‘me’ or ‘we’; to be able to take the form of a subject only in the non-identity to itself or . . . only in the difference with itself.” The same may be said of the apparent unicity or self-evidence of “today”: no “present” moment is identical to itself. For all its punctuality, it echoes and recalls other moments. For all its putative universality, there is no “today”—or, there is *not yet* a today—that might be shared, accessed, or lived by a European collectivity that includes both parts of Europe.

Derrida’s reflection brings into focus the question: How might Eastern Europe, entering “Europe” under the sign of backwardness, finally come to share in its present and become its contemporary? Even as Derrida labors to articulate Europe’s nonidentity with itself and to resist delineating an identifiable subject with concrete traits or boundaries, there is no doubt that he speaks *as* a European and *from within* Europe as his position of enunciation. From the point of view of Eastern Europe, however, inhabiting that position has not been fully accomplished but remains a matter of bridging a gap. In other words, if *within* Europe the only way of moving beyond Eurocentrism is in *not* being able to say “we”—and being open, instead, to the possibility that “we no longer know very well *what* or *who* goes by this name”—then at stake in Eastern Europe’s ongoing accession is, precisely, finally being able to say “we Europeans.”¹⁰ From this other side, it is crucial not only to identify what Europeanness means but also to identify with it and to embody it authentically and convincingly.

These simultaneous imperatives—one toward an opening and the other toward a closure of European identity—constitute one of the unnoticed contradictions of European unification and enlargement after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The problem of Eastern Europe’s integration into Europe concerns the possibility of a common present—that is, of a contemporaneous, coeval relation between Western and Eastern Europe. The problem stems from the legacy of Western

colonial histories and discourses. But Derrida's reflection on the critical elasticity of the idea of "Europe"—a trait long considered to be unique to Europe—points to its constitutive limitation: Europe cannot find a proper language of self-identification that would go beyond Eurocentrism because any avowal of responsibility threatens to become an occasion for a celebration of the self.

Because it has always been defined as noncoincident with Europe, Eastern Europe cannot directly participate in Europe's self-questioning. In 1990, it can at best be understood as an external prompt for this questioning. As Marc Crépon observes, this is how the legacy of Western colonial histories and discourses continues to affect intra-European relations:

A dividing line runs through Europe. It separates the member states, as well as those aspiring to become members, into two groups. On the one side, the majority of these states has in common the fact that their relation with the rest of the world has taken . . . the form of colonial domination. . . . What they have in common is that they carry within their histories, and have in their present, traces of this appropriation. . . . On the other side, the majority of the newly integrated member states . . . and of those aspiring to enter . . . have an entirely other memory of empire.¹¹

This dividing line—the distinct traces and memories of empire in the two parts of Europe—is not only a fact of the past but intrudes into Europe in the present. It demands to be worked through, translated into a new cultural relation and a new "today."

This dividing line has a double effect. The first consists in the simple fact of discrete histories, with Western and Eastern Europe following different paths in political development, industrialization, and cultural production, depending on their respective relations to, or positions within, empire. This might still be thought of in terms of a neutral, horizontal difference without a hierarchical division, if it were not for a second effect: the subjection of Eastern Europe to Western European colonial discourses on the one hand, and its historical domination by contiguous empires on the other.¹² This subjection makes it possible to say, for example, as Tony Judt has asserted, that a crucial difference between post-World War II Western and Eastern Europe consists in their respective ability or inability to manage traumatic histories. While Western Europe was able to move through it and past it successfully, Eastern Europe has remained trapped in incompatible and unsettled narratives of victimization and guilt.¹³ Eastern Europe's subjection to Western

colonial discourses is also what underwrites the pervasive account of Eastern European nationalisms as not merely different from Western European ones but backward with respect to them and more violent.¹⁴ It is also, finally, what dictates the terms of many philanthropic and non-governmental interventions in Eastern Europe after 1989, which have treated it as a new frontier of development. Whenever a cultural or historical trait is ascribed to the region, it is often informed by this imperial divide, which assigns Eastern Europe to a different time and constructs its cultural difference as a temporal distance from Europe proper.

Present-day accounts of Eastern Europe's emergence from its isolation and of its confrontation with Europe as an embodiment of progress and tolerance struggle to delineate its precise difference. Tropes of postcommunist "awakening," coupled with quasi-psychoanalytic narratives of long-buried tensions, serve to convey the need for Eastern Europe's tutelage in properly European openness. Thus references to Eastern Europeans' imputed incapacity to manage hostility can be found everywhere from scholarly projects to newspaper articles, so that the peaceful transitions in Eastern Europe are deemed remarkable while the "flaring" of tensions in the Balkans and the Caucasus, often described as "tribal," actually confirms expectations a priori set out by this discourse. As one research project describes it, this "borderlands" region presents the contemporary—which is to say, developed—world with a troubling anachronism: "The broad swath of territory running from the Baltic into Central and Eastern Europe, then into Southeastern Europe and Asia Minor, has been the site of some of the most sustained and intense ethnic violence in the modern era. . . . Communist power largely (though by no means completely) suppressed ethnic violence for nearly forty-five years, but with the collapse of communism, it has reemerged with a vengeance in the Balkans and Caucasus. Even areas that have not been marked by intense violence have encountered the seemingly intractable problems of diversity."¹⁵ The trope of slumber and subsequent awakening at work here informs other scholars' perspectives as well. Invoking this common notion, Anikó Imre writes that a central question facing contemporary Eastern Europe "is how [discourses on colonization, race, and . . . whiteness] have managed to stay submerged for so long. With the collapse of socialism, East Europeans have suddenly awakened from their relative imprisonment within the Soviet Bloc to find their national boundaries vulnerable to influence from a world that has moved on to an increasingly transnational order."¹⁶ The Soviet

era, here as in the “borderlands” project, is thus figured as a temporary lid that served to contain innate propensities.

This discourse obscures, rather than illuminates, Eastern Europe’s complex positioning with respect to Western European colonial histories as well as its own history of contiguous empire. It severs it from Europe, leaving the latter in the position to claim that it has overcome the legacies of colonialism, and renders moot any avowal of responsibility and mutual complication such as Crépon’s. Dipesh Chakrabarty provides another set of terms that might be borrowed to articulate Eastern Europe’s accession to Europe, to say that it is underwritten by the historicist transition narrative. Historicism, as Chakrabarty has written in the context of colonial India’s unequal relation to Europe (“the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories”), is what “made modernity or capitalism look not simply global but rather as something that became global *over time*, by originating in one place (Europe) and then spreading outside it. This ‘first in Europe, then elsewhere’ structure of global historical time was historicist.”¹⁷ Distinct as India and Eastern Europe may be in their positioning in relation to Western colonial histories and discourses, both are subjected to this epistemic structure, according to which any common “today” of an expanded Europe depends on Eastern Europe bridging its own temporal distance. Eastern Europe does not yet share the same present with Western Europe. Acceding to a shared “today” means also coming to occupy the position of enunciation of a common “we.” As Crépon writes, for the former colonial powers “it has always been easy to say ‘we’ on the scene of European history and to try to impose themselves on the world stage. For the other [group of states], being heard in this ‘we’ . . . was always (and remains so today) perceived as a major difficulty and one of the principal tasks imposed by history.”¹⁸ The deictic triad “we, here, now” is, thus, a crucial site of struggle in the ongoing integration.

If 1990 presented an occasion to reflect on European identity, another moment of crisis came with the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, when Western European intellectuals felt compelled to establish as precisely as possible what held Europe together. As some candidate countries, scheduled for entry into the EU the following year, chose to support the United States over the objections of France and Germany, and as Donald Rumsfeld carved Europe into Old and New and thus solidified a new divide, there was an urgent need to propose counterdefinitions and to articulate the bases for a common cultural identity and political unity. In a public statement entitled “February

15, or, What Binds Europeans Together: Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in Core Europe,” Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida issued a call to their fellow Europeans, seeking to find a balance between maintaining Europe’s essential openness and outlining concrete traits and values that might give it meaning nonetheless. Umberto Eco, Gianni Vattimo, and others soon joined them, through responses published in major newspapers across Western Europe.¹⁹ At such a moment, even a partial avowal of postimperial responsibility or the rare recognition, such as Crépon’s, that the “colonial fracture” continued to inform intra-European relations gave way to habitual modes of Europe’s self-identification.

This articulation of European identity under threat merits attention here because the deictic character of “Europe” emerges in it as if between the lines, as a matter of reflex rather than overt analysis. To be sure, there are explicit references to the Eastern European allies of the United States that signed the “Letter of Eight” pledging to support the United States—expressions of disappointment, outrage, even rebuke, which make it clear that the candidate countries, “while certainly working hard for their admission into the EU, are nevertheless not yet ready to place limits on the sovereignty that they have so recently regained.”²⁰ And it is against Eastern countries’ imputed political immaturity that (core) Europe’s tested ability to “painfully learn how differences can be communicated, contradictions institutionalized, and tensions stabilized” offers itself as a model and a point of resistance.²¹

The exclusion of Eastern European candidate countries from “core” Europe is, thus, justified by their regrettable response to the exigency of the moment. But it is in places where “Europe” speaks for itself—where the participants in this public debate focus on delineating properly European traits and values, in distinction from both the United States and Eastern Europe—that the deictic divide emerges in terms that transcend the moment of crisis. In this demarcation of Europe’s boundaries from within, deixis is at work not only in “we, here, now” invoked but also in affective attachments and evaluations of certain historical events.

And so, in “An Uncertain Europe between Rebirth and Decline,” Eco enumerates the historical experiences, and even feelings, that Europeans hold in common: “We all have suffered dictatorships” and “We all have experienced war in our own land, and the state of permanent danger.” If these facts can still be ascribed to all of Europe, including the East, the statement that “we all have experienced the failure

of colonialism and the loss of our empires” makes it clear that he is referring to the West.²² The “we all” is finally underpinned by Europe’s imperial history, which, cast here as an experience and a memory rather than merely an event, seals the “we” in a firmly demarcated community. The loss of empire, moreover, described in the passive voice, appears to be something that happened *to* Europe and something whose import lies in its effect on Europe. From this perspective, the primary meaning of imperial history lies in the fact of its having been traumatic to the former powers—precisely in its painful passing. In their own joint statement on the bases of future European cultural identity and political unity, Habermas and Derrida invoke this history in a similar way: “Each of the great European nations has experienced the bloom of its imperial power” and “Each has had to work through the experience of the loss of its empire.”²³ But empire is thinkable in terms of bloom and loss only from within Europe—terms incompatible with a world-historical view that would take Europe’s “others” into account.

The much more proximate—geographically as well as historically—event of the fall of the Berlin Wall figures here, in the debate over the future of Europe, in ways equally oblivious to any perspectives outside the (Western) European: it is, openly, a source of anxiety, albeit an anxiety successfully overcome; it is, at first, a potential threat but one that has been well managed, testifying to Europe’s resilience. “Europe on *this* side of the Iron Curtain,” the writers contend with undisguised nostalgia, developed “features of a common political mentality . . . so that others often recognize us as Europeans rather than as Germans or French.” This mentality includes the traits of civility, compromise, and openness to others. And, even though “the fortunate historical constellation in which West Europeans developed this kind of mentality in the shadow of the Cold War has changed since 1989–90,” nonetheless “the mentality has survived the context from which it sprang.”²⁴ Just as, for the formerly colonized, it would be inconceivable to consider decolonization in terms of loss, so for most Eastern Europeans it would be difficult to imagine the Cold War as a “fortunate constellation.” While it is irreconcilable with the perspective of those people most directly affected by them, the particular affective charge attached to both events—the “loss” of empires and the breach of the Iron Curtain—works alongside the deictic “we” to show that the fissure between Western and Eastern Europe is affective and rhetorical as much as it is historical and discursive.

But the imperial dividing line running through Europe is visible not only in the status of Eastern Europe as noncoincident with Europe. This line has also been subject to persistent acts of translation—acts that expose it the more they attempt to erase it. The legacy of Western European empire, then, is not merely a matter of the past that might make itself known in certain discursive aftereffects. It constitutes, rather, the very ground on which Eastern Europe’s accession to Europe proceeds. Responding to the imperative to position oneself with respect to the imperial legacy, to be able to speak for it and respond to it, is a condition of finally acceding to the European “we.”

AMBIVALENT IDENTIFICATIONS

The acts of cultural translation that respond to this imperative have been aimed at assuming the language of postimperial Europe. If there is such a thing as a language of contemporary Europe, one that consolidates the deictic “we” of the (Western) European community, this language may be called postimperial in two senses: it is inextricably informed by, and carries the traces of, colonial histories and discourses; and, at the same time, it consigns those traces to the past by claiming to have overcome that past. The cultural boundary between “Europe” and its Eastern not-quite-European other—the denial and deferral of Europeanness—is predicated, precisely, on the possibility of assuming an authentic position of enunciation and the possibility of its failure.

How, then, is it possible to come to share this language—when one does not already, or does not fully? How can one tell who is its rightful, native speaker and who an intruder? What kind of historical amnesia does learning it entail? Does it require, finally, identifying with imperial history as a European experience—and is identification, in any case, enough?

With some effort, these questions become discernible in a 2006 collection of lectures, entitled *The Other*, delivered by Ryszard Kapuściński to public intellectuals and academics in Austria and Poland between 1990 and 2004. They are based on his experience as a foreign correspondent for the Polish Press Agency, when he was often the only journalist from Eastern Europe covering decolonization struggles and dictatorial regimes in Africa, as well as civil wars, coups, and revolutions in Latin America, Asia, and former Soviet republics.²⁵ Compared to Kapuściński’s numerous and celebrated books, with their expansive

and reflective style of journalism, the short lectures in *The Other* are notably more placid and abstract. They stand in marked contrast, especially, to his reflections collected in *The Shadow of the Sun*, published around the same time as *The Other* but rooted more directly in his earlier travels in Africa throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

Focused on a long-historical view rather than on concrete experiences, the lectures endeavor to articulate a distinctly European sense of otherness—both as a historical legacy and as a kind of ethical compass for a globalizing present. This long view produces a strangely generic account, nearly indistinguishable from what may be expected from a perspective entirely internal to Europe—with avowal of responsibility going hand in hand with self-celebration. Kapuściński's "Other" is a figure of religious, cultural, and racial difference that originates outside Europe and can come to inhabit it only as an economic migrant or a political exile. "I use this word ["the Other"] primarily to distinguish Europeans, people of the West, whites, from those I'm calling the Others—that is, non-Europeans, non-whites,"²⁶ he tells his Viennese audience at the Institute for Human Sciences and there is, here, only *one* Europe. He goes on to establish the reciprocal character of otherness, to remind his audience that Europeans are also "other" to their "Others"; the direct proportionality between otherness and geographic distance; and the fact that otherness has long been the central preoccupation of most cultures, as evidenced by the world's literatures.

Europe, nonetheless, is exceptional: it alone displays "a curiosity about the world and the wish not only to control and dominate it, but also to know it."²⁷ Here as in many moments in *The Other*, "Europe" spoken of in the third person will, as a matter of course and without remark, shift into a univocal first-person plural as Kapuściński speaks of "*our* relations with other inhabitants of the planet" and "*our* ethical dilemma." The encounter with the cultural and racial Other is "the real challenge of *our* time," a time after decolonization.²⁸ As an inhabitant of *this* side of the Europe-Other divide, Kapuściński must adopt its diction.

The univocal "we" comes into explicit focus only once, when Kapuściński notes the need to rethink its equation with Europe as the universal, and the sole, subject of history. In the past, he writes, "in saying 'we,' we understood—'we, all people,' though in reality we only meant us, the Europeans. . . . Nowadays, however, we are irrevocably entering into an era when the unambiguous equation 'we = Europeans' as a synonym for all the people in the world is being questioned by

ongoing historical changes.”²⁹ But this remark induces vertigo. Even if, all along, Kapuściński’s assumption of a single European “we” appeared believable in the first place (an appearance that will not withstand a confrontation with *The Shadow of the Sun*), the comment is perplexing. In the past, there was one “we,” and now it must be replaced by another, more inclusive “we”—and yet it is the old “we,” a continuous subject, who is undergoing this profound change. If nowadays we (unmarked and without scare quotes) are entering a new era, is this the same *we* that must be abandoned for the sake of this new era? The “we” cannot be sustained; it is impossible to speak in the name of a world community if one also wants to speak from within Europe. The syntax of Kapuściński’s utterance cannot enact, reflect, or imagine the very ethical and political vision it proffers. There is not yet a grammar of a world-historical community.

It is much more difficult to discern, from Kapuściński’s effortless adoption of the European *we*, that *this* kind of subject does not exist either. There is no collectivity that might encompass both the West and the East of Europe, whether in terms of historical memory or in relation to the non-European world. The smooth progression of “Europeans, people of the West, whites” that makes each term a synonym for the others is upheld only by Kapuściński’s unmistakably Eurocentric rhetoric—that is, by his adoption of the postimperial discourse of Western Europe’s self-identification, a discourse that places openness to others and Europe’s purportedly unique capacity for self-critique as its core values. By sleight of rhetoric as much as by reference to Polish-born thinkers of otherness—Bronisław Malinowski, Joseph Conrad, and Józef Tischner—he inscribes Poland and the rest of Eastern Europe into Europe, as if they had always shared the same relation to imperial histories and the same burden of responsibility for their violence all along. It is impossible to decide whether Kapuściński, speaking as a European, does so as a matter of strategy—in order to perform, or even inaugurate, a unified European subject that is in fact still far from accomplished—or if the very topic of his lectures, “the Other,” merely invokes a pre-determined cartography of cultural and racial difference. But it is significant that, in order to speak as a European he must assume Europe’s postimperial speech, its contemporary benevolence and self-awareness along with its barely avowed memory of imperial violence. There is no space, within this speech, to account for the imperial divide that runs *within* Europe.

To claim Europeaness, it appears, Kapuściński must also forget his own insights articulated in *The Shadow of the Sun*—a collection of essays based on notes from his work in decolonizing areas of Africa. Although the book is published in 1998—around the same time as some of the lectures in *The Other* have already been delivered while others are yet to be drafted—it spans about forty years of his engagement with the continent. Even as each chapter points to a concrete time and location, moreover, later impressions and afterthoughts inflect the vignette-like accounts, so that it is difficult to construct an exact chronology of memories and reflections. *The Shadow of the Sun*, then, coincides with *The Other* even as it is also from an earlier time.

One chapter in *The Shadow of the Sun* in particular, entitled “I, a White Man,” elaborates something that goes missing in *The Other*: the sense of his own difference from Western Europeans, based on the impossibility of identifying with the white colonizers and the equally marked impossibility of refusing that identity. Kapuściński reflects on his own encounter with the apartheid system, in which “everyone, depending on the color of his skin, had his assigned role and prescribed place,” and which he saw extending beyond South Africa into every colonial state.³⁰ If in Poland, moreover, he had never thought about his own skin color, in Africa “it was becoming the most important determinant of my identity.” This realization, still commonplace, is followed by a reflection on the kind of responsibility this entails—*not* the benevolent sense of responsibility to be open to “the Other,” as the lectures in *The Other* suggest is characteristic of “Europe,” but something closer to culpability—a more direct responsibility for colonial violence, whose effects he witnesses everywhere: “The white man. White, therefore a colonialist, a pillager, an occupier. I subjugated Africa, conquered Tanganyika, put to the sword the entire tribe of the man just now standing before me, the tribe of his ancestors. I made him an orphan. . . . Yes, when he looks at me, *this is exactly what he must be thinking*: the white man, the one who took everything from me, who beat my grandfather on his back, who raped my mother. Here he is before me, let me take a good look at him!”³¹ In this scene, the accusation is imaginary; in the onlooker’s demeanor there is no threat of reprisal. The syllogistic succession of statements—I am a white man; the white man is a pillager; therefore I am a pillager—establishes his guilt beyond a doubt. This silent confrontation, contained in the look, echoes the well-known scene in Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* when a white child’s exclamation “Look, a Negro!” makes him “discover [his]

blackness.”³² But if, for Fanon, the other’s, the white onlooker’s, perspective is announced in the child’s scream, for Kapuściński the racial objectification takes place through a silent gaze. This gaze, moreover, does not establish his whiteness in distinction from the onlooker’s own blackness—*this* line is already drawn by the colonial apartheid system itself, before any encounter needs to take place. Rather, the silent gaze fixes Kapuściński’s whiteness by aligning him—without a doubt but also without confirmation—with other whites. The moment his skin color becomes significant also marks the moment of Kapuściński’s inscription into the colonial context. He knows that whiteness, which also entails the impossibility of disavowing one’s own whiteness, is a product of this context.

Indeed, the very choice to acknowledge his own culpability—a choice available to white Westerners—is not available to him:

Slavery, colonialism, five hundred years of injustice—after all, it’s the white men’s doing. The white men’s. Therefore mine. Mine? I was not able to conjure within myself the cleansing, liberating emotion—guilt; to show contrition; to apologize. On the contrary! From the start, I tried to counterattack: “You were colonized? We, Poles, were also! For one hundred and thirty years we were the colony of three foreign powers. White ones, too.” They laughed, tapped their foreheads, walked away. . . . I knew that despite my inner certainty about my innocence, to them I was guilty. . . . They could regard me from a position of superiority. . . . I stood among them weak, with nothing more to say.³³

Thus he inherits the history of colonial violence without inheriting it. It is not his inheritance, yet he cannot refuse it. This is how, in the context of a decolonizing Africa, he becomes European: he is unbelievable as anything other than a white man. Yet even if he cannot objectively and definitely establish his difference from the white Westerners, the point in the passage is, precisely, to mark both that difference and the false inheritance of colonial responsibility.

But in 2004, when he is speaking to his Viennese audience, both the violent colonial history that he found to be inherent in whiteness and the conflict involved in his own impossible identification as white disappear from view. “Thanks to them,” he says, meaning Africans, “I discovered the color of my skin, to which I would have not given any thought before.” The mediation of the apartheid system of colonial

governance, so crucial to his becoming white in *The Shadow of the Sun*, is erased in favor of a simple self-other confrontation, now devoid of any traces of colonial violence that gave meaning to that encounter in the first place. It is simply a beneficial self-awareness that he owes to black Africans. Kapuściński goes on to say: “The Others shed a new light on *my own* history. Hearing about Nazi concentration camps and Soviet gulags, they were surprised that a white man is so cruel toward another white man.”³⁴ In *The Shadow of the Sun* it was the unwanted inheritance of imperial history—avowedly *not* his own—that made his whiteness significant and brought a new, and conflicted, historical consciousness. Here, he turns away from Europe’s overseas imperial expansion to a more proximate history that, as an Eastern European, he truly can call his own. He converts what in Africa was a sense of postcolonial shame inherent in whiteness into a shame for Europe’s internal history, where whiteness is merely an outsider’s neutral perception of its inhabitants’ similarity with each other.

It is in light of this apparent forgetting of his own epiphany that Kapuściński’s unremarkably Eurocentric statements in *The Other* become remarkable. But here, even the word *forgetting* conceals divergent historical memories that constitute the dividing line within Europe. For when a Western European and an Eastern European speak the language of postimperial Europe they are not forgetting the same thing. In the case of the former, the history of imperial violence that underlies Europe’s encounters with and discourse about “Others” must be minimized if the belief in Europe’s essential respect for others is to remain intact. Rodolphe Gasché acknowledges that the strictly philosophical idea of Europe would not withstand a confrontation with history, even if only to defend it: “Though this feature is not ubiquitously manifest in Europe—indeed many occasions could be cited as evidence of violence against it—it is this very *demand* . . . of relating in a negative fashion to oneself and the ensuing openness to all others that is constitutive of a European ‘identity.’”³⁵ What must be forgotten here are the exceptions that, if fully accounted for, would make it impossible for Europe to continue to identify itself in such terms. For an Eastern European adopting this discourse of European self-identification, in contrast, what must be forgotten is his own noncoincidence with, or his own *not* sharing in, this disavowed history. To erase his own difference, Kapuściński must forget the history that is not his to forget to begin with because it doesn’t belong to him and doesn’t include him.³⁶

Kapuściński's seamless assumption of Europe's deictic "we" in *The Other* may be seen, finally, as an attempt to offer a workable model of tolerance for all of Europe facing twenty-first century's challenges. His capacity to invoke this model, moreover, might serve not only to assert and enact an enlarged European community as an accomplished fact. It may also be seen to operate in the context of the larger transition narrative according to which, after 1989, Eastern Europe is joining the West by slowly learning to adopt its norms. This transition has been marked by the appearance in public discourse of new, untranslatable, mostly English words: *gender*, *sexuality*, *otherness*. The effortful, fraught adoption of these terms—and the resistance they have met in both scholarly and popular discourses—shows the divide between Western and Eastern Europe to be crucially concerned with their self-positioning *with respect to* "difference."

This is particularly important because, as part of its enduring discursive construction as a discrete region, Eastern Europe has been characterized as a site of ancient, communal violence directed at "internal" others and, at the same time, as a relative newcomer to confrontation with "external" others. It is precisely of this very construction that Neal Ascherson avails himself when he writes, in the introduction to the English translation of *Ten Inny*, that Kapuściński's "awareness of shocking events in his own country gave his reporting of communal hatreds and fear in Africa a special edge."³⁷ The commonly evoked notion that the period of socialism effected a temporary repression of such tendencies—at the same time as it sealed the region from the rest of the world and insulated it from late twentieth-century demographic shifts—fits the framing of the collapse of the socialist regimes in terms of a sudden awakening, both to dormant violent propensities and to a globalizing world. As Wendy Brown writes in *Regulating Aversion*, "within contemporary civilizational discourse, the liberal individual is uniquely identified with the capacity for tolerance and tolerance itself is identified with civilization."³⁸ Because tolerance as such becomes a mark of cultural difference, one is either tolerant and thus included within the orbit of Western culture, or intolerant and outside this orbit.

It is within this transition narrative that, even as Eastern Europe is still an object of tolerance, it is also called on to become its subject—with the latter a condition of overcoming its own difference from Europe. In light of this, Kapuściński's capacity to speak in the name of a European "we"—precisely on the topic of tolerance and respect for

others—gains additional significance: it participates in this historicist development narrative at the same time as it signals achieved progress.

AFFECTIVE INSCRIPTIONS

Full integration into Europe, then, is a matter of mastering and convincingly inhabiting a certain lexicon of respect for others, along with the historical, cultural, and—least avowedly—racial identity it implies. As Kapuściński's *The Other* shows, whiteness—not as a neutral aspect of identity but as a differential value and an imperative that first attains its significance in the colonial context—goes missing from Europe's account of itself as exceptionally open to “others” and uniquely capable of self-reflection. It disappears from view especially in Europe's post-imperial speech, which disavows its reliance on the memory of empire by claiming to have overcome it.

In an assessment of the intersection of whiteness studies with postcolonial theory, Alfred López points out that the questions least addressed in that intersection concern what happens to whiteness after empire and how whiteness continues to operate as a value in postcolonial societies. This chapter, in part, has asked another question that falls out of their purview, one concerned with the operation of whiteness in European societies that do not share Western Europe's imperial history. As is evident in Kapuściński's remarkable forgetting of the fact of his own difference from Western European colonizers, the assumption of a univocal European “we” also entails a tacit assumption of a racial identity that, in *The Shadow of the Sun*, he wished but was unable to refuse. If whiteness as a value is disavowed in postimperial Europe, this instance of cultural translation must disavow it as well in order to succeed.

But the linear narrative of progress, according to which Eastern Europeans are now becoming European by assuming the language of postimperial Europe, is troubled by a certain stasis, a nonprogression. Not only does the aspiration to Europeanness transcend the historical moment of formal accession to the European Union—which shows how distinct the two processes are from each other—but, more crucially, earlier attempts at such translation *also* point to whiteness and to colonial histories and discourses as central aspects of Europeanness. Henryk Sienkiewicz's 1911 novel *In Desert and Wilderness* will show that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, becoming European

also meant finding a way to position oneself with respect to those histories and discourses—preferably from within them.

Set in the context of anticolonial insurrection in Sudan during the 1880s, the novel is arguably the most canonical of the few existing representations of Western colonialism in either Polish or Eastern European literature. It is a story of Staś, a fourteen-year-old Polish boy, and Nel, an eight-year-old English girl, kidnapped by Mahdist rebels in Egypt. Taken to Sudan by their captors, the children escape and wander through East Africa. They are finally rescued by two British gentlemen and reunited with their fathers, but only after Staś proves his resourcefulness worthy of a Boy Scout. The novel comes late in the career of the Nobel Prize-winning Sienkiewicz, whose work has exerted an extraordinary influence on the Polish national imagination. Produced at a time when Poland had not existed on a map for more than a century, Sienkiewicz's life's work delineates its contours both geographically and historically and outlines the Polish national character.

For Witold Gombrowicz, Sienkiewicz's significance is that he created an irresistible aesthetic in which the Polish nation acquired a lustrous glow of coherence—as if by a sleight of hand through which “a certain style determines the emotional range of a nation.” As he writes: “In order to understand our secret affair (for it is compromising) with Sienkiewicz, it is necessary to touch on a slippery issue, namely, the problem of ‘producing beauty.’ . . . The weaker and more threatened a nation is, the more painfully it feels the need for beauty, which is a challenge to the world: look at me, don't persecute me, love me!”³⁹ While this permanent mode of self-defense on the part of his beleaguered nation explains Sienkiewicz's enduring popularity, *In Desert and Wilderness* has a complicated place alongside Sienkiewicz's other works. Like them, it imbues the Polish characters with virtues rooted in patriotism and Christian faith. Staś's father, an engineer working on the Suez Canal, was sent to Siberia after the 1863 failed Polish uprising against czarist Russia. Staś himself considers Polish to be the most beautiful of languages and, in all his actions, strives to earn praise for behaving like a “true Pole.” On this level, then, the novel fits perfectly into Sienkiewicz's literary oeuvre as a whole.

What is distinct about *In Desert and Wilderness*, however, is that it places the question of Polish national identity in the African colonial context. This novel reveals that Poland, although outside the Western European imperial project, also had something to gain from colonial

discourses. Were it not for the novel's earnest patriotism and its profound didactic effect on both children and students concerning Polish virtues, it might be read as an excellent parody of Western colonizers' self-aggrandizing discourse. The narrative is replete with stereotypes of native Africans, and examples are as abundant as they are predictable. Fatma, the wife of a Mahdist rebel, has "superbly beautiful, although savage and . . . menacing, eyes," and "She lies like they can lie only in the East."⁴⁰ We learn that "in Egypt, both Arabs and Bedouins scream at every occasion as if they were about to murder each other."⁴¹ Besides such quasi-ethnographic details, the novel is full of observations about African landscapes, which recall paradise, and about the continent's political devastation that has turned it into a land of murder and disease. But the colonizer's dominant vision does not operate only through such observations. The very setting of the novel places Staś, Nel, and their fathers clearly on the side of beneficiaries, if not quite agents, of colonial violence: Mr. Rawlison is richer than all the Sudanese taken together, and Mr. Tarkowski lives next door in a more modest but still comfortable house. The colonizer's perspective, moreover, is often disguised in the unspoiled, innocent gaze of children oblivious to grand imperial projects—or, conversely, of children whose lives are so embedded in these projects that they cannot imagine a different way of seeing. Whether it's innocence or thorough complicity, the effect is to naturalize the colonizer's worldview.

As if to buttress the children's effortless charm with a reasoned argument, a discussion in the beginning of the novel about Britain's civilizing role schools the reader in a colonial rationale. Mr. Rawlison patiently explains to Staś that "the Egyptian government . . . restored [freedom] to millions of people. . . England, which, as you know, chases after slave traders all over the world, agreed that Egypt take Darfur and Sudan, because it was the only way of forcing [slave traders] to give up this atrocious trade. . . . Unhappy blacks breathed with relief . . . and people began to live under some sort of rule of law."⁴² Moreover, Rawlison proclaims, "England is patient because it is eternal." England is eternal by virtue of having the last word, claiming the right to fix reality first within the stereotype, then within a universal form of social organization. It is not merely imperial: divine nature is reflected in the language it speaks. The figures of speech it uses, as Edward Said has written, "are all declarative and self-evident; the tense they employ is the timeless eternal; they convey an impression of repetition and strength."⁴³ This confidence is reaffirmed at the end of

the novel, when Captain Glen, one of the children's rescuers, declares: "The whole edifice erected by Mahdi must sooner or later fall."⁴⁴ When Staś asks what will be after that, Glen answers, "England"—thus echoing Mr. Rawlison's conviction that England is eternal, that it will outlast strife and rebellion.

But strife, impermanence, and uncertainty regarding the future—as well as an obstinate persistence within the immaterial sphere of individual consciences—do characterize Poland at the time. As if in response to his conversation with Captain Glen, Staś steals away to carve something into a rock. "Jeszcze Polska . . ."—the initial words of Poland's national anthem that asserts, "Poland has not perished yet while we are still living"—are the trace he wants to leave. Poland is not eternal because it is not England, because it does not command armies or whole nations—and to say that it has *not yet perished* is to admit that it might. Yet Poland is eternal because its spirit lives, because its idea has survived more than a century of statelessness. The Britons are "surprised that the boy didn't think of putting his own name on this African rock. But he preferred to carve what he carved."⁴⁵ This highly personal, solemn moment marks a rare point of difference from the Westerners, who don't understand his quaint patriotism. Unlike they who expect only victory, he appears to be devoted to a lost cause, a specter.

Perhaps it is this spectral Poland rather than a straightforward desire to serve England's brand of civilization that prompts Staś to fulfill the colonizer's mandate so enthusiastically. The British civilizing mission turns out to coincide with Staś's innately upright character and Christian faith, so that—rather than merely imitating the colonizer—he acts of his own accord in the name of honor and God. By claiming Christian and "Western" values to be his own by virtue of his Polish identity, he claims a status equal to the British in the racial hierarchy of humankind. When faced by Mahdi's demand that he convert to Islam, he takes a stand in defense of his faith that is at the same time a defense of both Polishness and Western civilization. Having refused at the risk of death, "the boy, a faithful descendant of the defenders of Christianity, the just blood of the victors from Chocim and Vienna, stood with his head high, awaiting the verdict."⁴⁶ Chocim and Vienna point to Poland's victories over Oriental-Islamic threats to Europe in the seventeenth century that saved all of Europe from a tide of invasions from the East. Recalling this unacknowledged debt that Europe owes Poland not only places Staś on an equal

plane with the present-day civilizers of Africa but endows him with a sense of mission of his own.

The novel does not represent a direct relation between Poles and Africans, because their relation is already mediated by British colonial rule. Once free from captivity, Staś takes on the work of instilling order and Christian values. Baptizing Mea and Kali, the young black Africans who travel with the children, is the first successful project, even if the two Africans “understood the teachings in their own way, specific to blacks. . . . Slowly, what their heads could not comprehend, their warm hearts embraced. . . . Mea felt somewhat disappointed, because in her naivete she thought that her skin would whiten immediately, and she was astonished to see that she remained as black as before. But Nel [assured] her that now she had a white soul.”⁴⁷ It is not Staś but Mea and Kali themselves who affirm the value of whiteness. The motif of a white soul beneath a black skin returns when Kali manages with the help of Staś to find his tribe. “The Wa-hima have black brains, but your brain should be white,” Staś instructs the newly restored tribal prince in good governance. “They are like jackals and hyenas—turn them into human beings.”⁴⁸ When Kali gains Staś’s approval for his efforts to rid his tribe of superstition, the young king exclaims in a characteristically broken syntax: “Kali now have white brain!”⁴⁹

This is one way, then, in which white superiority is effortlessly claimed: black Africans themselves attest to it. It is also constantly reinforced through the contrast with stereotyped natives—whether vilified Arabs or infantilized blacks. This elaboration of whiteness as naturally desirable because allied with civilization—in a novel that, for the Polish reader, is part of Sienkiewicz’s greater project of delineating the Polish national character and place in history—serves to establish Staś as a white man. Thus, in addition to stressing Polish character traits—something Sienkiewicz’s other novels already do—the colonial setting of *In Desert and Wilderness* aligns Polishness with whiteness beyond a doubt. As if to prove this true, a dying Swiss geographer whom the children encounter at one point exclaims in delirium: “A white boy! I’m seeing a white man again! Welcome, whoever you are. . . . It’s good to see a European face.”⁵⁰

In Africa, Poles are no longer Eastern Europeans, no longer citizens of a nonexistent state or political exiles condemned to nomadic existence, but white and simply European. The colonial context erases the difference that exists only within Europe. Whiteness, a sign of oppression and imperial dominance for the colonized, here becomes a

liberatory signifier.⁵¹ If Achille Mbembe is right to say that “Africa as an idea, a concept, has historically served . . . as a polemical argument for the West’s desperate desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world,” then a Polish author’s similar use of Africa as mere background folds Poland into the West—by sharing in Western colonial modes of self-definition, in its discursive tactics of differentiation.⁵²

At the end, Staś emerges as a godlike figure—riding astride an elephant, in possession of a stock of firearms, with Nel at his side like a small deity. He appears that way almost unwittingly, through a happy accident of flawed translation: it is the black Africans’ limited range of practical wisdom that make them interpret the children as supernatural. Staś has not imposed anything on them, yet they not only accept his rule but offer their servitude. This isn’t far from Staś’s own self-conception: as a white man, he is indeed superior, able to maneuver Africa better than the natives. In an illusion of untroubled communication, the colonizer’s vision wins over native frames of reference without resistance.

Whether Staś *intends* to act exactly like the British colonizer or simply cannot help spreading good manners by virtue of being Polish, however, the objective effects of his actions certainly resemble those of the British. In addition to dominating the natives’ minds, Staś succeeds in marking their geography. Visiting East Africa ten years later, this time as a married couple, Staś and Nel see even more lasting effects of their and their fathers’ benevolent influence. Looking with nostalgia at the landscape they once traversed on foot and animals’ backs, they see a landscape transformed by railways and canals. The plight of their former friends has also improved. As predicted, Sudanese rebels have been defeated and England has come to reign. The elephant they once rescued lives under the care of local British authorities—as does Kali, who “governs, under British protectorate, the entire land south of Lake Rudolph, and brought missionaries to spread Christianity among local savage tribes.”⁵³ The mission to protect Africa from ivory hunters and slave traders has been fulfilled.

As Mbembe writes, “Africa is the mediation that enables the West to accede to its own subconscious and give a public account of its subjectivity.”⁵⁴ When Staś is still struggling to find his way out of the “wilderness,” he has a fantasy, inextricable from the colonial context, that gives such a public account: “The thought entered his mind whether it wouldn’t be good to come back here some day, conquer a huge piece of land, civilize black tribes, establish a new Poland in these parts or

even to return, at the helm of well-trained black warriors, to the old one. But . . . he felt that there was something comical in this thought, and . . . doubted whether his father would let him play an Alexander the Great in Africa. . . . Nel would surely be the only person in the world to applaud him.”⁵⁵ This is the only explicit thought of following in the colonizers’ footsteps for the sake of power as such, rather than for the sake of justice, Christianity, or liberation from slavery. Yet the fantasy is immediately banished, laughed away, and this disavowal is as important as the fantasy itself. To cross the line from being a beneficiary of colonial violence to being its conscious agent would mean, for Staś, to return to Africa to do everything he has already done—only the second time, to do it with full intention, no longer being able to claim innocence. What as a wanderer he did out of sincere Christian impulse that just happened to coincide with his Polish character, as a conqueror he might repeat out of the impulse to imitate the British. The fantasy must be banished: Poland never did colonize, and it mustn’t be allowed to do so even in a child’s daydream. At the same time as the fantasy is dismissed, it serves as a disavowal of Poland’s complicity in imperial projects of the West. The identification with white colonizers, which Sienkiewicz so laboriously traces throughout the novel, breaks down to reassert a difference after all.

In this novel, a complicity with colonial discourses that claims to be detached from complicity with colonial violence fits well within the psychic economy of Poland’s national liberation. Sienkiewicz’s aesthetic appeal is directly linked to fantasy—which, as Jacqueline Rose has observed, is not “antagonistic to social reality; it is its precondition or *psychic glue*.”⁵⁶ It is also fantasy that constitutes the pleasure of reading Sienkiewicz’s novels: he pleases because he fills a need. *In Desert and Wilderness*, then, may be read as an attempt to resolve Poland’s marginal status through imaginative participation in Western colonial ventures. Apparently detached from imperial pursuits, the novel has played a vital role in the nation’s psychic economy, and it is still widely read by schoolchildren in Poland as well as abroad. What Homi Bhabha calls “the primal moment when the child encounters racial and cultural stereotypes in children’s fictions, where white heroes and black demons are proffered as points of ideological psychological identification,” remains disavowed here:⁵⁷ the African background is seen as gratuitous, a fairy-tale setting for an excellent story about good and evil that is seen not to have any relation to Polish history, and the colonial past is seen as merely colorful and exotic.⁵⁸

As Staś inscribes the Polish anthem into the rock, and as he fantasizes about transplanting Poland onto African soil, Sienkiewicz's novel as a whole inscribes Poland into Western Europe's universal values by producing affective investment in whiteness as a mark of Western civilization. These multiple inscriptions mark a complicated, overdetermined relation to, and position within, histories of global empire. At the same time as they mark a difference from the British colonizer, they also authorize Poles to imagine themselves as fully European. Yet in the present moment a novel such as *In Desert and Wilderness*—thus far received as an artifact solely of national culture, testifying to Polish virtue and to its national spirit—must be retranslated in its turn. “If we cease seeing a teacher and master in him,” Gombrowicz urged in 1956, “if we understand that this is our intimate dreamer, the shameful teller of dreams, then his books will . . . lead us into the murky dark recesses of our personality. If we treated Sienkiewicz's writing . . . as an outlet for our instincts, desires, secret aspirations, we would see truths in him about ourselves that would perhaps make our hair stand on end.”⁵⁹ Will the colonial “background” remain so neutral and external to Polish national history? And, if not, from what perspective can it become newly legible: from the perspective of postimperial Europe, in which it is possible to describe the passing of empire as a loss, or, alternately, from the postcolonial perspective? *In Desert and Wilderness* is a trace of colonial history embedded in the core of a European nation that does not share in this history directly. Rereadings of such traces taking place within the present postimperial discursive environment are reported, by turns, to occasion moments of revelation, to elicit resistance, to provoke outrage. It is no longer certain, for example, whether Slovenian, Latvian, or Polish children's poems that feature exotic characters—“Pet Zamorckov,” “Briesmonis,” “Murzynek Bambo”—are innocent stories that have always meant to promote intercultural awareness, stories that in any case reflect a natural order of things expressed in commonsense language, or if they are unseemly, compromising remnants of a now-embarrassing mentality.⁶⁰

Another such remnant is found in the improbable campaign, initiated by the founders of the Polish Maritime and Colonial League in the late 1920s, to win colonial territories for the newly independent Polish state.⁶¹ At first dismissed and ridiculed both by the League of Nations and by the Polish government, by 1938 the League was a social movement organization with over a million active members. It organized annual “colonial days,” with street festivals and demonstrations in

which thousands of people carried banners with colonial slogans, with “carriages decorated with tropical plants, carrying colonial goods such as rubber, cotton, and cocoa; in [the city of] Radom scouts formed a picturesque caravan of Arab merchants.”⁶² To members of the League, it was clear that, at the time, becoming European had something to do with becoming a colonial power.

When such traces of colonial discourses and histories do resurface in Eastern Europe—whether in the form of a half-forgotten ditty or a little-known historical fact such as the Maritime League’s colonial days—they have the ambivalent force of the uncanny, “that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar,” something old that presents itself as new.⁶³ The temporality of these translations is not one of historicist linearity or progressive development but one of deferred action. Such moments of uncertainty shore up the foreignness of one’s own culture, so that something long considered one’s own is suddenly estranged—both by the question of its sources (Where did it come from?) and by the question of its readability (To whom does the last word belong, who decides what it means?). If what is thought to have been “ours” can no longer be read in “our” customary ways, it demands to be reread either as something that must have been foreign to begin with or through a foreign discourse that stems from unclear referents. Such cultural artifacts demand this kind of translation in the present. It is possible that they will be declared to have belonged to “us” fully all along—in the way that “we” have belonged in Europe.

PART TWO

Conditions of Legibility

The Right Accent

Europe, Irony, and Conrad's Long Silences

Give me the right word and the right accent and I will move the world.

JOSEPH CONRAD, *A Personal Record*

At the end of “A Familiar Preface” to *A Personal Record*, Joseph Conrad thus remarked on the reception of his autobiographical work: “I fear that trying to be conversational I have only managed to be unduly discursive. . . . My young days . . . have been rather familiar with long silences. Such voices as broke into them were anything but conversational. . . . Yet this discursiveness is not so irrelevant to the handful of pages which follow. They, too, have been charged with discursiveness, with disregard for chronological order (which is in itself a crime), with unconventionality of form (which is an impropriety).”¹ This passage responds to readers’ frustration with the opacity of Conrad’s language—with a formal unorthodoxy that is especially unwelcome in an ostensibly autobiographical work. Yet what he calls discursiveness, and what we today might call literariness, is not a mere flourish of authorial vanity or a deliberate violation of the expectation of transparency. It is, rather, a formal element of his writing that gives witness to his life as faithfully as any discernible content of his recollections. The “long silences” that marked his youth now mark his writing. This passage links Conrad’s literary style to his early life, away from the context of Western European imperialism in which his works have been firmly placed. The “long silences” are an allusion to the mournful atmosphere of his childhood and, at the same time, a figure for the formal inventiveness specific to his writing.

The critical reception of Conrad’s work has operated with a persistent, if often only implicit, assumption of a divide between the West and

the East of Europe as separate cultural regimes. Modernism has been mobilized, in turn, in further consolidating this divide. Thus modernism, capitalism, and imperialism have come to constitute a cluster of mutually implicated developments that is taken to underpin the specificity of the world represented in Conrad's stories and to account for the specificity of the West itself. Against this fixed paradigm, Eastern Europe stands as a world apart: precapitalist, nonimperial, belatedly partaking of modernity, positioned as the West's other "other." Juxtaposed with this at once geopolitical and literary-historical frame of intelligibility, Conrad's statement in his autobiography concerning the origins of his writing style complicates the by now customary link, made by Marxist and postcolonial critics, between imperialism and the innovations of literary modernism. This chapter is concerned with the broader cultural imaginaries constructed and invoked in the course of contextualizing Conrad's work and with the ways in which his writing itself responds to, troubles, or even refuses these imaginaries.

Such apparently extrinsic, because contextual, constructions—operating in the basic categories of literary criticism and literary history, in both their national and their transnational scopes—may appear of little import compared to the intrinsic value of Conrad's literary works. But such considerations are difficult to separate from the encounter with the text itself. As Fredric Jameson has observed, "We never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather, texts come to us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or—if the text is brand-new—through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions."² These inherited traditions of reception and frames of intelligibility are an integral part of reading. To acknowledge them as active components of interpretation (rather than its neutral background) is also to put into question the common-sense notion of context as a given, objective historical situation and geographic location.

The very distinction between text and context, or intrinsic and extrinsic considerations—so central to many turns in literary criticism as it has moved in the past century between formalisms and antiformalisms, and central also to emergent notions of "world literature" at the turn of the twenty-first century—will undergo a significant revision in the course of reading Conrad's work. Context itself will turn out to be constructed rather than self-evident, pregiven, and readily available. In the most recent reconsiderations of literary value in cross-cultural

reading—precisely in the world-literary frame—the text-context distinction has acquired new meanings, with the interplay of transparency and opacity emerging as a central concern. Depending on the status of a literary work, context has been taken either to be self-evident, accessible, and universally shared (as in the case of canonical works) or problematical, obscure, and in need of elucidation (as in the case of works only recently included alongside the canonical). In either case, the cultural and historical context to which a work is assigned plays a role in determining and stabilizing its meaning.

Complicating these categories, Conrad's fictional and nonfictional works consistently foreground textual undecidability and problematize historical referentiality. Especially through the rhetorical strategy of irony, his writings refuse the very notion of a fixed cultural context that might be given independently of reading. In this chapter, I read Conrad's work with attention to the rhetorical dimension of his texts, which, as Paul de Man has put it, "has to do with the necessity of deciding whether a statement in a text is to be taken as a figure or *à la lettre*."³ A statement or a question thus becomes rhetorical "not when we have, on the one hand, a literal meaning and on the other hand a figural meaning, but when it is impossible to decide by grammatical or other linguistic devices which of the two meanings . . . prevails. Rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration."⁴ As with any author, literary criticism and history forestall the danger of "referential aberration" by assigning Conrad to a proper contextual situation. I will focus on three moments in Conrad's own writing that challenge such habitual modes of reception: the "Author's Notes" that accompany all of his works; passages from his autobiography, *A Personal Record*; and the textual strategies employed in the 1911 novel *Under Western Eyes* to reimagine intra-European relations in ways that do not support, and that indeed render untenable, received binaries.⁵ As these textual moments refuse the fixed boundaries of East and West of Europe, they also offer a way to renegotiate the polarized relationship between history and textuality, or extrinsic and intrinsic considerations, in literary criticism. The question of the new ground of comparison that surfaced in literary studies at the turn of the twenty-first century becomes here a question of reading, not of juxtaposing presupposed units of culture such as nations or regions.⁶ If literature constitutes, in de Man's words, "a link between poetics and history," then reading Conrad with attention to rhetoric restores that link. It makes context as open to reading as the text.⁷

HOMO DUPLEX

In an often-cited letter to Kazimierz Waliszewski, Conrad writes of his double identity: “Both at sea and on land my point of view is English, from which the conclusion should not be drawn that I have become an Englishman. That is not the case. *Homo duplex* has in my case more than one meaning.”⁸ Conrad is referring here to his life experience, divided between Poland and Britain, with a brief interlude in France.⁹ The critical reception of his work reinscribes the split in his biography: on the one hand, he is seen as an essentially English writer, one who served the British Empire first in the merchant service and then through literary production;¹⁰ on the other, he is seen as a writer with origins in Eastern Europe (whether Poland, Ukraine, or the Russian Empire) and, thus, on the margins of capitalist and colonial developments that defined the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These two worlds have been construed as belonging not only to distinct cultural spheres but even to distinct temporalities, with England set in the present and Poland in the past—as in a Penguin edition of *The Portable Conrad*, for example, organized under the separate headings “Poland and the Past” and “England and the World.” Poland represents the past both biographically, as the place of Conrad’s upbringing, and civilizationally, as the place where social values and economic conditions already outmoded in the West continue to thrive. As such, it can never be brought into a contemporaneous relation with England, which stands at the center of economic and cultural progress. Conrad’s dual cultural identity is, thus, also a dual temporality.

The divide between a Western European and an Eastern European, or an English and a Polish, Conrad is inherited and further consolidated in the shift from Conrad as an English writer to Conrad as a postcolonial writer. The relative absence of Polish themes from Conrad’s own work is mirrored in the relative absence of his Polish background from critical considerations of his works’ relationship to imperialism.¹¹ In *Postcolonial Conrad: Paradoxes of Empire*, Terry Collits marks the boundaries of the cultural sphere relevant to Conrad’s work as rooted firmly in the West: “The life span of this . . . novelist of far-flung places of empire . . . coincided with a crisis in British imperialism. Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski was born in 1857, the year in which the so-called ‘mutiny’ of the Indian army took place. . . . He died in 1924, the year that saw the publication of E. M. Forster’s classic colonial novel, *A Passage to India*.”¹² Closer to home, Conrad’s life might be

told as beginning just before the last major, and failed, Polish uprising of 1863, which directly affected his family, and ending with the dream of an independent Poland (for which his parents were dispossessed and sent into exile and for which Conrad himself later wrote impassioned appeals) momentarily fulfilled after the Treaty of Versailles. Such a mapping of his life onto the history of European contiguous empires and the history of Eastern European rebellions against them would also have to account for Conrad's chosen pen name—an anglicized version of Konrad, the middle name he was given by his insurrectionist parents and referring to Konrad Wallenrod, a romantic national hero in Adam Mickiewicz's work by the same name. Redrawing the narrative of Conrad's life to fit the frame of British colonialism, Collits obscures the Russian imperial history and its impact on Conrad's family, a history that is at least as immediate as that of "far-flung places" of the British Empire.

In another iteration of the gesture, Natalie Melas takes these boundaries for granted in *All the Difference in the World* as she mentions Conrad's Polish background briefly only to dismiss its relevance to her own discussion of imperialism: "Without denying the degree to which Conrad's exceptional life experience undoubtedly inflects his narratives," she writes, "I want to argue that . . . the complex disarticulation of community"—something accomplished through his stylistic innovations—"emerges *from within* the specificity of the colonial situation."¹³ Michael Valdez Moses, in turn, has attempted to reconcile the English and the Polish Conrad by arguing that, as someone hailing from a premodern world of Eastern Europe, Conrad could more easily identify with the colonized in novels such as *Lord Jim*. Although himself a participant in British imperial ventures, "Conrad was acutely sensitive to the fact that many of his fellow [British] citizens continued to regard him as an exotic 'oriental' Slav, not fully English or even Western."¹⁴ Thus, by virtue of his status as outsider, he is closer to postcolonial writers like Chinua Achebe than to British writers such as Rudyard Kipling. Having brought with him from partitioned Poland "a premodern form of social organization," Conrad is said to be fond of "anachronistic types" and outmoded values.¹⁵

Deciding—as the above critics seem compelled to do—which historical and geographical contexts are relevant for interpreting Conrad's work entails carving out separate cultural spaces, between his Polish past and his life in England, or between Russian-dominated Poland and the British Empire. This compartmentalization of Conrad reflects the

fissures not only in the global cultural imaginary that informs literary studies but also within Europe itself, where the two cultural spheres are taken for granted as given and separate.

From the other side of this divide, the reception of Conrad's work in Poland has its own history.¹⁶ After an early period dominated by public accusations of desertion and betrayal voiced by prominent Polish writers, Conrad's status in Poland reached a high point during World War II, when *Lord Jim* was a defining text for underground resistance fighters. More recently, there have been attempts to examine the ways in which Conrad's origins may be seen to inform his work. In the introduction to *Conrad and Poland*, for example, Alex Kurczaba expresses the hope that the book would mark "the crossing of the shadow line beyond which criticism incorporating Conrad's Polish experience grows to maturity and that it opens the way to further insights into Conrad's life and works."¹⁷ Zdzisław Najder, in turn, argues that "the knowledge of [Conrad's] Polish background allows us to select the proper 'dictionaries,' appropriate historical and cultural frameworks of reference in interpreting his stories and novels."¹⁸ While it is undeniably important to illuminate the Polish roots of Conrad's literary and personal influences, there is a way in which selecting "appropriate dictionaries" specific to Poland does not contribute to "the crossing of the shadow line" but maintains the line intact. If Najder hopes that knowledge of Conrad's Polish background will enable a better understanding of his work, for now it functions merely as a supplement to Conrad's English context.

Postcolonial criticism on Conrad's work and research on his Polish background, then, rarely speak to each other and the two settings of Conrad's life and work remain discrete and impermeable. This reiteration of their separateness is continuous with early anxieties of Conrad's readers to decree him a purely English writer. Conrad himself was most guarded on the question of his origins at the beginning of his career, when he was eager to establish his reputation and to secure a readership. This is why *The Mirror of the Sea*, an early memoir, is for Edward Said "an evasive masterpiece of truly impersonal intimacy."¹⁹ As Andrea White argues, it "cannot be simply nonfictional revelation. . . . Rather, writing from within, constituting himself as 'one of us,' he works . . . to construct a self authorized to speak," an English writer entitled to address the English.²⁰ When growing public esteem made it impossible not to address his background more directly, Conrad produced another, more revealing memoir, *Some Reminiscences*,

which later became *A Personal Record*. Conrad published it hoping, as he wrote to J. B. Pinker, that it would “make Polish life enter English letters” and that, as he told readers in “A Familiar Preface,” “from the reading of these pages there may emerge at last the vision of . . . a coherent, justifiable personality both in its origin and in its action.”²¹ The “Author’s Note” to *A Personal Record*, added to the book years later, suggests that his efforts to settle the question did not succeed as he had hoped. “I have always felt myself looked upon somewhat in the light of a phenomenon,” he writes, “a position which outside the circus world cannot be regarded as desirable.”²²

Subsequent critical reception, although less explicitly invested in maintaining Conrad as purely English, has continued this early trend: Conrad is either simply English, and then also global and postcolonial, in which case his Polishness is left behind altogether; or he is *also* Polish, but with his Polishness moved into the background, declared to be only of special interest. If, as Andrea White writes, the idea “that identity is discursively constructed across difference, and is a positional not an essentialist concept that relates less to our ‘roots’ than a coming-to-terms with our ‘routes,’ was not yet on the theoretical agendas in the early 1900s,” then this essentialism has not been entirely superseded in literary-historical practice.²³ Thus the multiple determinations—and the “long silences”—that inform Conrad’s lived experience as well as his writing are reduced, denied, or translated into the either/or of received categories.

STABLE FRAMES

The regional imaginary reflected in literary criticism and history that—often implicitly yet nonetheless firmly—insists on the separateness of Western and Eastern Europe also operates within Marxist and postcolonial thinking about the relation between the aesthetics of literary modernism and the politics of Western imperialism. In theorizing the interconnectedness of modernist aesthetics and politics, critics have asked how the distant reality of the colonies manifested in the literary fictions of the imperial centers. Making such a link between imperialism and metropolitan cultural production was itself an intervention into two prevailing ideas: the understanding of modernism as manifestly apolitical, and the notion of Western Europe as fully coincident with itself and distinct from the colonial spaces. Asserting imperialism

to be relevant to metropolitan fictions enabled scholars to read modernist works politically and, at the same time, to decenter Europe. The reception of Conrad's work has followed this trajectory, from Conrad as an English author writing for the English, to Conrad as a postcolonial author engaged in a critique of their professed exceptionality.

Modernist literary form has been central to this demarcation. Because form appears more interior to a literary text than content, the penetration of empire through the Trojan horse of form makes the connection all the more secure and the influence all the more insidious—or objective. According to Jameson's well-known essay "Modernism and Imperialism," colonial life, often unrepresented on the level of content, entered metropolitan letters through literary form. "Daily life . . . in the metropolis no longer has its meaning . . . within itself. . . . This new and historically original problem . . . constitutes . . . the formal contradiction that modernism seeks to solve."²⁴ For Jameson, the incapacity to represent the experience of empire on the level of content forces innovation on the level of expression. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said makes a similar claim: "that many of the most prominent characteristics of modernist culture, which we have tended to derive from the purely internal dynamics of Western society . . . , include a response to the external pressures on culture from the *impe-rium*."²⁵ In a recent echo of this thesis, in turn, Melas asserts that Conrad's language is one "debased by imperialism . . . [so that] there is not only the familiar discrepancy between word and thing . . . , but where the relation between them is one of outright negation."²⁶ The formal characteristics of Conrad's writing become, thus, unequivocally traceable as the textual marks of Western European empire. His position as an English and then a global-postcolonial author is stabilized first by the Western canon and then again by the very critical movements aiming to disrupt it.

The paradoxical effect of this general thesis is that, by positing the colonial other—a single identifiable other of Europe's own creation—as the absent cause of metropolitan high culture, Jameson, Said, and Melas end up reconstituting (Western) Europe instead of unsettling it. While these efforts are aimed at decentering Western Europe, they do not so much question its exemplary status as merely redraw its boundaries—only this time around an enlarged space.²⁷ Theorizing the way in which Western Europe's colonial outside is implicated in its most prized, apparently internal cultural achievements ends up positing a new set of inside-outside: only now, the outside is constituted by the

precapitalist, older European empires, while the reformulated inside is expanded to include (Western) Europe and its colonies. But this new, unexamined outside is not thought to be relevant to the cultural sphere now containing Western Europe and its colonies. Rather, it stands in a spatial relation of pure exteriority, and a temporal relation of absolute anteriority, to it.

The terms in which we understand the relation of Conrad's split biography to his work are themselves dictated by this regional frame. In the abstract, it may go without saying that any contextualization simultaneously illuminates and obscures. In literary critical practice, however, awareness of this double effect gives way to context as adequate explication; contextual units of analysis appear transparent, preconstituted, and self-evident—even as they take active part in carving out, and reinforcing, the cultural boundaries that in turn come to determine the conditions of legibility of literary texts. Conrad's own statement about the origins of his style—about the “long silences” of his youth now indelibly inscribed in his writing—troubles the association of the modernist aspects of his style with Western imperialism. Yet we may not quite take him at his word because the regional imaginary invoked and reinforced in Marxist and postcolonial criticism exercises its own, competing authority; it relegates Conrad's early life to the archaic and the premodern, so that values such as honor (in *Lord Jim*, for example) become readable only as vestiges of an outdated mode of production proper to the East of Europe.

ESTRANGING THE CANON

Recent debates in comparative literature and cultural studies responding to the theoretical and institutional challenges posed by Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial work have brought to the foreground questions of reading that have long animated—and divided—literary scholars.²⁸ As Françoise Meltzer has put it, attempts to reconcile text and context have always produced dizzying effects: “With our double lens of history on the one hand, and textual configuration on the other, we are left with a type of dialectic which, while enriching reading . . . leaves the quandary of how to read from this dual perspective. It is as if one had on glasses with a different prescription in each lens.”²⁹ The unresolved tension between intrinsic and extrinsic

reading—between textuality and history, aesthetics and politics, formalism and antiformalism—has returned to haunt literary criticism in an apparently new guise. In debates on world literature, this quandary of mismatched lenses seems to be inscribed into the very name of the field of inquiry—“world literature”—where *world* and *literature* may be seen as competing terms. When transposed onto the global scale, the older critical divide between history and textuality manifests itself as a *cultural* and hierarchical divide as well. Literary value—traditionally aligned with textuality and aesthetics, and with the notions of the masterpiece and the classic—always already belongs to works of the Western canon, while the recently canonized or the yet-to-be canonized works from contexts outside the West are “windows on the world,” read primarily for culture and history.³⁰

In the expanding literary field, these marginal works are the problematic, unstable elements being integrated into traditional literary fields. Canonical, Western literatures, in contrast, are figured as fixed, stable reference points—imagined either as already belonging to a system that must simply be expanded or as the apex of a hierarchical structure that might need to be leveled. In this process of integration, a marginal author’s national context or a work’s cultural provenance can, paradoxically, become both a liability and the very guarantee of its value. Writing about Maghrebi literature, for example, Réda Bensmaïa argues: “These novels were . . . almost invariably reduced to anthropological or cultural case studies. . . . And once they were finally integrated into the deconstructed canon of world literature, they were made to serve as tools for political or ideological agendas. This kind of reading resulted . . . in their being *reduced to mere signifiers of other signifiers*, with a total disregard for what makes them literary works in and of themselves.”³¹ The elision of literariness, here, results from the obfuscating function of the national or the regional frame, which calls attention to itself by virtue of its foreignness or its particularity and which demands explication.

It follows that attention to the literariness of marginal works (meaning their rhetorical dimension rather than their aesthetic value) might challenge such habits of reading and promote the noncanonical within the globalizing field of literary studies—a point often made by Gayatri Spivak as she insists on the figural.³² Closer attention to their textuality, moreover, would render problematic the presumed coherence and identity of their contexts as categorically other and sealed in their opaque national or regional frames. Most importantly, however, the canonical

itself might become estranged if the questions so often prompted by the peripheral were to be directed back at it. The canonical itself—as the purportedly stable center of a changing system—might need to undergo defamiliarization before the system as a whole can change.

How does context function in our habits of reading canonical works? And might attention to textuality be compromised in their case as well? Despite the general schema that aligns textuality with the canonical and history and politics with the peripheral, it is not only marginal, non-Western literary traditions that benefit from rethinking the relation between text and context. In the case of canonical, Western literatures, as in the case of the English and then postcolonial Conrad, the cultural or historical context often appears as already known and thus transparent—and, when it isn't already commonly known, it is considered at least to belong on *this* side of the self-other divide and thus always already to be relevant and in principle assimilable.³³ Their context, in other words, does not appear to obstruct reading. Yet a certain elision of textuality is present in customary modes of reading canonical work as well. Conrad's status has not freed the reader-critic to abandon extratextual questions in favor of purely textual analysis. While extrinsic considerations appear to be taken up differently in this canonical writer than they might be in the reading of a "marginal" text, the persistent grounding of Conrad's work in history and biography reveals how important a certain notion of "culture" is even here. For a significant portion of Conrad's critical reception has focused attention on his historical context and on his biography—that is, his cultural identity, authorial intention, and political convictions—as indispensable for proper understanding.

But why would identifying a writer as belonging to a specific cultural sphere, in terms of either origins or influence, be so problematic? Is it not necessary—as Benedict Anderson has shown in *Imagined Communities*—and even theoretically justified to place a writer's work within a national frame such as that of England or, when the language of production or the thematic concerns are not confined to that national frame, within a broader cultural sphere such as "the West" or "the British Empire"? Delineating such a context, after all, is the very precondition of a work's intelligibility and enables us to account for its political effect, its relationship to history, and its place within literary-historical cartographies.

The problem is that—even if, as an English and then a postcolonial writer, Conrad is exempt from the marginalizing weight of cultural

or historical particularity—there is a way in which his work is also “reduced to mere signifiers of other signifiers,” to recall Bensmaïa’s words. The difference is that here it is a question not so much of learning about his cultural sphere as of reiterating and reinforcing assumptions about its coherence. Conrad’s Englishness, in other words, serves an ideological function too. As Salman Rushdie matter-of-factly observes, literature has been treated as an expression of nationality because “books are almost always praised for using motifs and symbols out of the author’s own national tradition . . . when the influences at work upon the writer can be seen to be wholly internal to the culture from which it ‘springs.’”³⁴ Necessary and self-evident as it seems, the delineation of a writer’s proper context promotes “the fantasy of purity”—the fantasy of civilizational exceptionality in the case of an English Conrad, and the fantasy of authenticity and particularity in the case of marginalized writers. Paradoxical as it may sound, then, a canonical work’s very assimilation into a smooth, transparent frame of intelligibility can obstruct reading. A degree of such assimilation is, of course, necessary: a work must be placed in *some* frame to reach any readers at all; institutional and academic recognition is crucial to any author’s being read in the first place.³⁵ But such institutionally necessary practices also have an effect on the *manner* in which the reader encounters the text. In Conrad the canonical author, having already been read is a precondition for anyone reading him at all, but at the same time the manner of reading is to a certain extent already determined. Although there is no obvious cultural barrier here, the reading of Conrad’s work is mediated. To recall Jameson’s words, it, too, comes to us as “already read” by experts, literary historians, and critics who reassure us that there is nothing alien in the text.

If attention to literariness can, by all accounts, promote the non-canonical, it may also estrange the already established. Literariness—the figural dimension of the literary text—need not stand in a polar opposition to history but, instead, may be seen to engage the historical dimension from a different point. Conrad’s own reflection on the task of the writer—to provide “that glimpse of truth for which you [the reader] have forgotten to ask”—prompts the question of what sort of truth it may be, and through what kind of reading it may be glimpsed.³⁶ Conrad’s canonical status and his firm place in the Western European sphere can have the effect of deflecting attention from “that glimpse of truth.” Conrad’s work foregrounds the problem of reading as one necessarily bound to the figural dimension of language, rather than to the

author's identity or to fixed cultural spheres that might undergird stable literary fields. Preoccupied with the "moral conditions" governing certain parts of the globe, his work gives the reader a glimpse of truth by calling into question the referential dimension of language. Conrad stages this intervention in three ways: by offering his own theory of authorship in the "Author's Notes"; by turning to irony as his foundational textual maneuver; and by rendering problematic the notion of fixed cultural boundaries, especially in *Under Western Eyes*.

DEATH OF THE AUTHOR'S NOTES

The notion of the author—the middle term between a single work and a literary tradition—often functions to stabilize the meaning of both a literary work and a cultural sphere implied by that tradition. For de Man, literary interpretation itself "belongs traditionally to the sphere of theology" because it depends on the external authority of the author in the way that interpretations of the Bible have traditionally depended on the authority of God. For this reason, the process of interpretation has had to "raise questions about the extralinguistic truth value of literary texts." This is especially the case in a hermeneutic approach, which is by definition "directed toward the determination of meaning." Reading "is a means toward an end, a means that should finally become transparent and superfluous; the ultimate aim of a hermeneutically successful reading is to do away with reading altogether."³⁷ Within the hermeneutic enterprise, thus, the figure of the author serves to arrest meaning in a single, coherent source external to the literary text. For de Man as for Roland Barthes, "To assign an Author to a text is to impose a brake on it, to furnish it with a final signified, to close writing. This conception is quite suited to criticism, which then undertakes the important task of discovering the Author . . . beneath the work: once the Author is found, the text is 'explained,' the critic has won."³⁸ This is precisely why Conrad's own engagement with the category of the author, and the way in which his work resists the foreclosure of reading implicit in this category, merits attention. Conrad's theory of authorship emerges from the twenty "Author's Notes" to his works, most of which were composed between 1917 and 1920. Along with *Notes on Life and Letters*, a collection of nonfiction writings published in 1921, the "Author's Notes" have been seen as a testamentary act—an attempt by an aging writer to influence how he will be perceived

in the future. Instead of pronouncing a final word on the texts they accompany, however, the “Author’s Notes” reveal a certain conception of figurality that may guide our reading of his work.

The “Author’s Notes,” like all elements on the periphery of the text proper, belong to the paratext. In Gérard Genette’s words, the paratext is a threshold “between the inside and the outside, itself without rigorous limits, either towards the interior (the text) or towards the exterior.” It is “a zone not just of transition, but of transaction: the privileged site of . . . a better reception of the text and a more pertinent reading.”³⁹ As elements on the threshold, however, Conrad’s “Author’s Notes” do not simply stand in a perfect balance between fiction and reality, looking, Janus-faced, equally in both directions or mediating between them, as if to usher the reader into the fictional world. Neither do they lean outward to the real world—the “author” in the “Author’s Notes” resolutely avoids self-evident facts. Anyone hoping to glean direct explanations of Conrad’s work from *Notes on My Books*, a collection of the Notes published by Doubleday in 1921, would be disappointed: the Notes, arranged there side by side and severed from the bodies of work to which they belong, have a rather estranging effect.

Like all paratexts, the Notes do make for a more pertinent reading—but not by offering authoritative commentary. Most of them written well after the initial publication of the works they accompany, they occasionally respond to the public’s misconceptions or critics’ misreadings—but they do this in order to prevent the closure of meaning more than to correct understanding. In the “Author’s Note” to *The Secret Agent*, for example, Conrad responds to reproaches for what critics saw as “the sordid surroundings and the moral squalor of the tale.” Yet he does not distance himself from the anarchist world and doesn’t dispel suspicions of sympathizing with it. Instead, he writes: “I have no doubt . . . that there had been moments during the writing of the book when I was an extreme revolutionist, I won’t say more convinced than they but certainly cherishing a more concentrated purpose than any of them. . . . I was simply attending to my business . . . with complete self-surrender. I could not have done otherwise. It would have bored me too much to make-believe.”⁴⁰ The question of where Conrad the author stands with respect to his subject matter cannot be answered definitively—the very practice of writing permits him to occupy various personae with a concentrated, if temporary, commitment. Instead of offering the last word, the “Author’s Notes” employ the same strategies of displacement of authority as those that operate in Conrad’s

fictional works, where perspectives are not only multiple but also of uncertain validity. In other words, the Notes do not provide the ground of unequivocal truth missing from the stories and novels but reenact its absence and, by doing so, affirm the purposefulness of the strategies of the fictional texts. The Notes are, thus, continuous with the stories and novels, but not in the way an explanation follows from its object; they belong, rather, to the same world as the stories, displacing the boundary between what is intrinsic and what is extrinsic to a literary text. The Notes are not solely of the “real” world but belong just as much to the fictions.

Conrad’s elision of authorial mastery manifests itself in the way the “Author’s Notes” refuse to stand outside the texts or to serve as stable reference points. Most significantly, however, the “Notes” speak to the works’ often-unverifiable origins. In the “Note” to *Lord Jim*, for example, Conrad writes of the protagonist: “He is not the product of coldly perverted thinking. . . . One sunny morning, in the commonplace surroundings of an Eastern roadstead, I saw his form pass by—appealing—significant—under a cloud—perfectly silent.”⁴¹ In a similar manner, the genesis of Winnie Verloc’s character in *The Secret Agent* is attributed to an offhand statement by a friend: “‘Oh, that fellow was half an idiot. His sister committed suicide afterwards.’ These were absolutely the only words that passed between us,” Conrad writes. “It never occurred to me later to ask how he arrived at this knowledge.”⁴² The sources of the stories are traceable only to fleeting affects, figures, or casual remarks—but these cannot be taken for determinate origins, since they themselves are, rather, *effects* generated by other causes, impossible to recover.

Aside from focusing attention away from tangible origins, Conrad takes pains to avoid accounting for who *really* speaks in the text. In “A Familiar Preface” to the autobiographical *A Personal Record*, he gives a more direct glimpse of his implicit theory of authorship: “A novelist lives in his work. He stands there, the only reality in an invented world, among imaginary things, happenings, and people. Writing about them, he is only writing about himself. But the disclosure is not complete. He remains . . . a figure behind the veil.”⁴³ He is writing about himself at all times, yet he cannot be discovered; he is the only reality but cannot be located. This may sound as if Conrad is inviting us to keep looking for the real author hidden underneath his fictions, for that “only reality in an invented world.” It may also sound as if Conrad is making us a promise that finally here, in an ostensibly autobiographical book, he is

going to give us the long-deferred disclosure. Yet *A Personal Record* does not offer it either. It is, avowedly, not a fiction, and yet it is prefaced, just like Conrad's fictions proper. This alone creates—perhaps unwittingly—a layered effect, of story within story, or of nested degrees of referentiality, as if the Preface and the even later “Author’s Note” to *A Personal Record*—which together constitute not one but multiple “threshold[s] between the inside and the outside”—were meant to be read as more direct and less veiled than the text they frame.

Perhaps to unveil the real Conrad from beneath even these statements, critics have argued that his reticence is due to his insecure position as an outsider to England, a foreigner who would rather beguile than alienate. Najder, for example, reads *A Personal Record* as a “considered reply” to the accusation pronounced by Robert Lynd, a contemporary of Conrad, that “Mr. Conrad, without either country or language, may be thought to have found a new patriotism for himself in the sea. His vision of men, however, is the vision of a cosmopolitan, of a homeless person.”⁴⁴ And when Conrad writes, in the preface to *A Personal Record*, “Could I begin with the sacramental words, ‘I was born on such a date in such a place’? The remoteness of the locality would have robbed the statement of all interest,” we might comment that he is conscious of the cultural divide between himself and his audience, or that he is deliberately carving out a public persona to appeal to his English readers.⁴⁵

The more Conrad points attention away from himself and toward the very problem of the limits of knowledge and of language, the more we might be compelled to discover what he is hiding. But the question of his motivations is quite distinct from the question of the effect of his writing. What would it mean to take Conrad at his word and to resist grounding his texts too directly in his biography or his intention? If, as Roland Barthes has charged in his own familiar critique of authorship, “the image of literature to be found in contemporary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions,” then is there a way to treat Conrad’s work *without* seeking “the explanation of the work . . . in the person of its producer, as if . . . it was . . . the voice of one and the same person, the *author*, which was transmitting his ‘confidences’”?⁴⁶ Such author-centered readings promise to unearth something that the literary text appears to refuse to tell, yet on which it seems to depend. But to suspend the temptation to look for the author underneath the text, we might ask, as Françoise Meltzer does: “What is *lost* when the reader

knows the historical events to which [the writer] alludes? . . . When those events are evaded or implied rather than stated overtly, how can the reader overcome the natural tendency to foreground them and, in so doing, to resist the conviction that by digging up a subtext, he or she has succeeded in reaching the truth?"⁴⁷

ACCENTED WRITING

Instead of treating biography and other extratextual elements as an explanatory force that might ground the text, we might take them to stand in an ironic relation to it. De Man examines irony as that which puts in question the very possibility of understanding: it is essential, for a proper interpretation, to know whether what we are reading is ironic, and yet the question is difficult to settle. Rather than being signaled by specific textual elements that may be possible to isolate, irony for de Man is a "permanent parabasis," a constant "interruption of a discourse by a shift in the rhetorical register." Irony is, thus, located "not just at one point but at all points," since "at all points the narrative can be interrupted."⁴⁸ A passage from Friedrich Schlegel's novel *Lucinde* illustrates its work as the novel appears to engage in a philosophical argument but turns out, *also*, to be about sexual intercourse. Because two incompatible discourses are set to coincide in a single passage, "they disrupt each other in such a fundamental way that this very possibility of disruption represents a threat to all assumptions one has about what a text should be."⁴⁹ The passage shows that "words have a way of saying things which are not at all what you want them to say. . . . There is a machine there, a text machine, an implacable determination and a total arbitrariness."⁵⁰

In "A Familiar Preface" to *A Personal Record*, Conrad raises the possibility of such a disruption when he reflects on the power of words: "Give me the right word and the right accent and I will move the world." Is "the right accent" meant to be a provocation, an allusion to his own spoken accent? Is Conrad commenting on the complex relationship between the effect of writing and the writer's cultural status—saying that, in order to be heard at all, one needs not only to find the right words in the right language but also to pronounce them in a certain way, so as to be granted recognition and declared legitimate? If so, then one's provenance and location make all the difference. If so, then an utterance never stands on the merit of its intrinsic artistry, its

truth, or its wisdom alone, but finds its authority buttressed by cultural hierarchies. When read on its own, apart from the rest of the Preface, the sentence appears to make a strikingly forceful statement about the weight accorded to cultural particularity in any act of reading.

Yet, just as forcefully, the passage from which the sentence comes appears to deny such a conclusion; the passage as a whole implicitly insists that “accent” has nothing to do with one’s origins or cultural status—quite literally, it concerns merely the inflection, the strength, and the quality of one’s voice:

He who wants to persuade should put his trust not in the right argument, but in the right word. . . . You cannot fail to see the power of mere words; such words as Glory, for instance, or Pity. . . . Shouted with perseverance, with ardor, with conviction, the two by their sound alone have set whole nations in motion and upheaved the dry, hard ground on which rests our whole social fabric. . . . Of course the accent must be attended to. The right accent. . . . The capacious lung, the thundering or the tender vocal chords. . . . Give me the right word and the right accent and I will move the world. . . . *Because written words have their accent too.* . . . For who is going to tell whether the accent is right or wrong till the word is shouted, and fails to be heard, perhaps, and goes down-wind, leaving the world unmoved?⁵¹

In a disavowal of accent as a mark of foreignness, the passage pretends that “accent” is merely a mark of charisma and individual character. One’s origin and location, here, make no difference. Yet if “written words have their accent too,” if they can fail or succeed in being heard, they are also eminently *without* accent precisely because they are written. The reference to speech belies the neutral (that is, unaccented) inflection of Conrad’s use of “accent”; the written word is *not* the spoken word. The written and the spoken thus interrupt each other as conflicting rhetorical registers, the one capable of disguising national origin and the other forced to reveal it. The discourse of the writer as a universal human being speaking for all humanity is interrupted by the discourse of the writer as situated within complex relations of power out of which his word necessarily emerges and which determine whether or not it will go “down-wind.” The apparent transparency of words printed on the page is contradicted by the opacity of words when they might be said aloud—when they

pass through the bodily apparatus that leaves its mark on them and that is, in turn, itself marked by culture. The transparent and the neutral are, here, spoken of in the same breath as the opaque and the marked.

Conrad writes from within the English language, but it is an English marked by an accent—sometimes audible, sometimes hidden. His origins are always already dislocated, disrupted, and embedded in the voice that marks him. This instability of reference—or irony—is irreversibly inscribed into Conrad's work.

UNDER WESTERN EYES

Under Western Eyes troubles the idea of Western Europe and its colonies as a self-enclosed sphere. It helps interrogate the epistemological limitations of absolute cultural boundaries. And it enables us to see the rest of Europe in a relation to Western Europe other than that of pure exteriority or pure anteriority. Without collapsing the two parts of Europe into a single undifferentiated space, the novel shows them to be mutually implicated and rearticulates commonplace notions of intra-European difference—those operative in Conrad's time as well as those at work in ours. It is attention to the novel's form—central to the connection made between modernist metropolitan texts and colonial spaces—that makes the relation of mutual implication between Western democracy and Eastern difference (here, Russian autocracy) intelligible.

Like the passage in *A Personal Record* on the right accent, *Under Western Eyes* is an explicitly ironic text, one that makes an effort to disturb the stability of the divide between Western and Eastern Europe, to disturb the certainty of reference, and to question Western European exceptionality. The novel's critical reception, significantly, bears the mark of this divide. *Under Western Eyes* is taken to be especially opaque because it deals with Russia, a subject apparently removed from the British Empire; because it is thematically close to Conrad's cultural origins, presumably less universal than the colonial settings of his novels of the sea; and because it employs rhetorical strategies that confront the reader with a profound uncertainty as to its political stance.⁵² Discussions of it unavoidably raise the question of Conrad's opinion on Russia because it has often been read as a veiled confession of his own political loyalties and as a rare venture into matters close to

his family history. Such an approach is all the more tempting because the novel was written at the same time as the memoir *Some Reminiscences* and because several of his nonfiction pieces serve as evidence of Conrad's presumed Russophobia—among them, the essay “Autocracy and War,” which is a direct condemnation of Russia, and personal letters, in which his espousal of Bismarck's statement “‘La Russie, c'est le néant’ . . . anybody with eyes can see it” appears unambiguously anti-Russian—even as the letter in which he writes this is actually dedicated to explaining his effort of complete detachment.⁵³

In this contextual constellation, the novel appears as merely one piece in the puzzle of Conrad's political opinions. To be made coherent with his nonfiction writings, it must be stripped of its narrative and rhetorical dimensions as if they were merely veils for the reader-critic to remove. Conrad's own admission in the “Author's Note” to *Under Western Eyes* that “the obligation of absolute fairness was imposed on [him] historically and hereditarily” seems, paradoxically, only to provoke the reader-critic, to invite such work of unveiling. While Conrad writes that he “had never been called before to a greater effort of detachment from all passions, prejudices and even from personal memories,” a persistent focus precisely on those prejudices and on his presumed failure to conceal them reinstates his personal views into the text.⁵⁴ But *Under Western Eyes* is more than an expression of an unequivocal anti-Russian political stance. It displaces the question of the author—of a single, coherent determination of meaning—so that Conrad's political essays cannot be read simply as more direct explications of what the novel makes opaque.

The intervening presence of the narrator is the first and most visible barrier to a direct transposition of the novel's point of view onto Conrad's. The narrator is a teacher of languages and a Westerner who tells the story of Razumov, a philosophy student in St. Petersburg. His revolutionist classmate Victor Haldin asks Razumov for help after carrying out a terrorist plot, but Razumov chooses to denounce him and is subsequently forced to spy on Russian political exiles in Geneva. As the teacher of languages translates—for his Western readers—Razumov's diary into English, he insists on minimizing his own role in transmitting the story. His occupation, “fatal to whatever share of imagination, observation, and insight an ordinary person may be heir to,” has stripped him of the powers of invention necessary for any divergence from facts. His account, moreover, is based on documentary evidence: “All I have brought to it is my knowledge of the Russian language,

which is sufficient for what is attempted here.” This insistence on the straightforward nature of his task, however, is compromised by an equally persistent foregrounding of the very problem of transmission. For one, there is language itself: “Words, as is well known, are the great foes of reality,” the teacher says early on.⁵⁵ Then there is the diary’s form. Far from being a record of Razumov’s immediate experience, the diary turns out to be a retrospective account of events that took place a year before it is actually written. The diary itself, in other words, is mediated through Razumov’s own later perspective. Finally, the teacher periodically interrupts Razumov’s story to interject his own reflections and to question his own capacity to either understand what he is reading in the diary or explain it to his Western readers. What makes the narrator unreliable is not simply his limited Western perspective but his inability to control language, to make words do what he wants.

Looking at Razumov’s story through the teacher’s eyes thus allows only a partial view, obstructed by the narrator’s obsessive attention to his own limitations and distorted by the intervening West-East frame. As he explains his Eastern subject to his Western readers, the teacher plays the role of a cultural translator as well. In the process, he withholds certain things deliberately, insisting that his paraphrases and omissions make the subject more palatable. Instead of simply translating the raw document of the diary, he rewrites it and calls attention to its existence even as he withholds it from the reader’s direct view: “The record of the thoughts which assailed him in the street is . . . minute and abundant. They seem to have rushed upon him. . . . On looking through the pages of Mr. Razumov’s diary I own that a ‘rush of thoughts’ is not an adequate image. The more adequate description would be a tumult of thoughts . . . but they cannot be reproduced here in all their exclamatory repetitions which went on in an endless and weary turmoil.”⁵⁶ The teacher’s account would be tedious if it were not for the promise of revelation, if it were not that he holds the reader hostage, captivated by the absent “document” and frustrated by the obvious distortion it must undergo in the teacher’s hands. The diary is the missing subtext, the origin of the teacher’s account, yet the reader never sees it directly.

We must, then, follow the teacher in his tortuous digressions if we are to glimpse the always-deferred presence of Razumov himself. The necessity to withhold is explained by the difference between the West and the East of Europe—and it is this difference itself that is

being translated here and for which Razumov's individual experience appears to be only a pretext. As the narrator explains: "If to the western reader [Razumov's thoughts] appear shocking, inappropriate, or even improper, it must be remembered . . . that this is not a story of the West of Europe. . . . It is unthinkable that any young Englishman should find himself in Razumov's situation. . . . The only safe surmise to make is that he would not think as Mr. Razumov thought at this crisis of his fate. He would not have an hereditary and personal knowledge of the means by which a historical autocracy represses ideas, guards its power, and defends its existence."⁵⁷ This hereditary knowledge comes to Razumov's consciousness gradually, in the course of his experience with Haldin the revolutionary. Before the encounter, his position is apolitical: "This immense parentage [Russia] suffered from the throes of internal dissensions, and he shrank mentally from the fray as a good-natured man may shrink from taking definite sides in a violent family quarrel."⁵⁸ After Razumov has denounced Haldin, however, he writes five lines on a piece of paper that will be pinned to the wall above his bed:

History not Theory.
Patriotism not Internationalism.
Evolution not Revolution.
Direction not Destruction.
Unity not Disruption.⁵⁹

In this list of antinomies, Razumov is making a choice, consolidating his political identity on the side of reason and stability and rejecting everything Haldin stands for. The antinomies appear stable, the meaning of each term guaranteed by its separation from its opposite.

Immediately following this begins a new chapter, with the narrator reflecting on his own task of rendering Razumov's story meaningful to his readers. His earlier insight about the unreliability of language (that "words . . . are the great foes of reality") notwithstanding, the teacher of languages searches for a "keyword" to sum up "the moral conditions ruling over a large portion of this earth's surface"—"a word that could stand at the back of all the words covering the pages." Such a word would guarantee the stable reference of all the other words; it would fix them in place and defy irony. But the one word that persistently comes to the teacher's mind is *cynicism*: for "the spirit of Russia is the spirit of cynicism. It informs the declarations of her statesmen, the theories of

her revolutionists . . . to the point of making freedom look like a form of debauch, and the Christian values themselves appear actually indecent.”⁶⁰ Cynicism by definition collapses all meaningful distinctions. If it is admitted to stand at the back of all the words, then it dislocates instead of grounding.

Just as Razumov’s convictions “had become crystallized by the shock of his contact with Haldin” in the set of oppositions pinned to the wall, so the narrator’s own image of Russia becomes crystallized in the keyword of *cynicism*—though for him this one word suffices. The narrator, a mere observer, imagines himself to be immune to the choices Razumov is forced to make. In the teacher’s rendering, however, it becomes clear that Razumov is not capable of making the right choice. His fatal flaw is not in his character but in the “moral conditions” governing the very language he mistakenly trusts to be a guide. With cynicism at their back, the oppositions between history and theory, or between evolution and revolution, are already corrupted, porous, undermined by falsity. If the oppositions pinned to the wall above his bed are destabilized by cynicism—the word supposed to underlie the moral conditions of autocratic Russia—then Razumov cannot be in charge of his own destiny because the language supposed to make it intelligible fails him.

Cynicism as the final word thus cannot be the final word if meaningfulness as such is to be preserved. It needs still other words to back it up. What then might stand, in turn, at the back of “cynicism”? Something like truth, or sincerity of motives, which constitutes the final hope of grounding reality, might stand at the back of cynicism itself, as its opposite—analogue to the way in which Western democracy might stand at the back of autocracy as its opposite. But either truth cannot be uncovered or—more insidiously still, as Razumov says later—“There may be truth in every manner of speaking.”⁶¹ The two scenes—first of Razumov, then of the teacher, grappling with language—point to the novel’s seemingly impenetrable opacity as its precise focus. Instead of being an obstacle to understanding, or a screen beyond which might stand something apprehensible, language—corruptible and arbitrary—is the determining locus of understanding and its sole condition of possibility. Moreover, the difference between East and West of Europe is, in the novel, a specifically political difference, and one that hinges on the relationship to language: while in the East the instability of language is laid bare, in the West it may still be possible to take it for a reliable ground of action and belief.

Belief in the West as the guarantor of reliable language is possible, however, only when the West stands alone as a distinct cultural sphere, untroubled by a confrontation with its political other. Within a coherent, self-enclosed discursive space of the West of Europe, self-defined by democracy, language appears self-evident and transparent. It is only in juxtaposition with its other—with duplicity and opacity (the defining marks of autocracy)—that this apparently coherent structure can be put into question and dislocated. The very opposition of East and West—although constantly reiterated in the teacher’s self-conscious account, which labors to keep them separate—is, therefore, undermined when Razumov’s set of oppositions collapses. Once such a crisis is revealed to be possible anywhere, it cannot be contained to the East. To recall de Man’s insight concerning irony, “This very possibility of disruption represents a threat to all assumptions one has about what a text [or, indeed, what a coherent discursive and historical sphere] should be.” The very possibility of a double code *somewhere* introduces the suspicion that irony may be at work everywhere.

The novel reveals a permanent parabasis—the back-and-forth shift between different rhetorical registers and between incompatible referents—to be operative in another way as well: by alluding to a scene far removed from the reach of Russian autocracy. The general who receives Razumov’s denunciation of Haldin cannot contain his hatred of revolutionists. “I detest rebels of every kind. I can’t help it. It’s my nature!” he says. “They shall be destroyed,” and again, “They shall be destroyed.” His devotion to the cause of autocracy is absolute: “One comfort there is. That brood leaves no posterity. I’ve always said it; one effort, pitiless, persistent, steady—and we are done with them for ever.” Listening to him, “Razumov thought to himself that this man entrusted with so much arbitrary power must have believed what he said or else he could not have gone on bearing the responsibility.” The general, in the meantime, continues: “I detest rebels. These subversive minds! These intellectual *debauchés*! My existence has been built on fidelity. . . . But pray tell me what honour can there be as against rebels—against people that deny God Himself—perfect unbelievers! Brutes. It’s horrible to think of.”⁶² The outburst culminates with words that invite the intrusion of another setting into this scene: that of the Congo, and of colonial administrators’ contempt for the natives. The phrases “Exterminate all the brutes” and “the horror” from *Heart of Darkness* are allowed to penetrate into St. Petersburg, as if the general were speaking Kurtz’s words.

This intrusion does not result in a comparison between the Russian Empire and Western European colonialism. It merely—and perhaps more effectively than comparison might—casts doubt on the presumed discreteness of the two spaces. *Under Western Eyes*, then, is not simply a condemnation of Russian autocracy, exploring it as a self-contained discursive and moral sphere. The novel, rather, focuses on the mutual disruption of the East and West of Europe, as the two apparently coherent frames of reference become unmoored.

Only on the level of content can the novel may be read as such a direct condemnation. It appears to put the two parts of Europe in stark relief, treating these discursive spaces as fixed and mutually impermeable.⁶³ Stability and democracy on the one hand, and despotism and disorder on the other hand, appear to account for the distinct moral conditions of Western and Eastern thought, everyday as much as political. By continually reminding us that “this is a Russian story for Western ears,” the teacher of languages reasserts East and West as stable categories. Yet even the few overt references to the West, still on the level of content, already begin to question the stability of these categories. These references do not represent Western Europe as a space of superior moral values that may be pitted directly against the “un-European despotism” of the East.⁶⁴ Far from safeguarding truth and democracy, a role that would justify the binary treatment of East and West, Geneva is “indifferent . . . in its cold, almost scornful, toleration.”⁶⁵ The Western nations, as Natalia Haldin says, “have made their bargain with fate,” “so much liberty for so much hard cash.”⁶⁶ “The savage autocracy, *no more than the divine democracy*, does not limit its diet exclusively to the bodies of its enemies. It devours its friends . . . as well.”⁶⁷ These remarks about Western Europe may still maintain—indeed, insist on—the separateness of the two spheres, but their relationship is no longer that of opposites.

On the level of form, the novel effects a more thoroughgoing disruption, and a more profound unmooring, of these apparently stable reference points. This becomes evident in the figure of the narrator: in his role as translator, he endeavors to explain and to elucidate Russia for the Western reader, but in the course of this translation he must also hold on to the East-West interpretive frame as a guarantee of stable meaning—he must continually reassert the divide by arbitrating what belongs to which part of Europe even as the whole point of any translation would appear to be the dismantling of the divide. The teacher is trapped in a structural paradox proper to translation itself:

any successful translation, and the ostensible understanding that might follow from it, would break down any meaningful distinction between democracy and autocracy that he must maintain in order to retain the illusion of intelligibility.

The moment Razumov tries to choose reason and stability, and writes down the set of oppositions—history, evolution, direction, *not* theory, revolution, or destruction—the very distinction between the two sides is disrupted. For *reason* and *stability* refer to two contradictory contexts at the same time: Russian autocracy (when reason and stability are considered in opposition to revolutionary chaos) and Western democracy (when they are pitted against lawlessness). The rejected terms of the antinomies—*revolution*, *destruction*, *internationalism*—are threats common to both spaces.

The duplicity of language foregrounded by such moments comes to disrupt the apparent separateness of Western Europe and its intra-European other, Russia. By the end of the novel, the difference between them is no longer that between stability and instability, or truth and falsehood, but between mutually implicated brands of corruption. While in its content *Under Western Eyes* is concerned with Russian characters and events, in its form it is an indictment of the West as well. If Conrad's colonial fictions reflect on the false ideals of European imperialism, *Under Western Eyes* reflects on its democracy. It is to enable this kind of reading that Conrad, paradoxically, uses his own authority as author to displace authorial mastery and labors to make visible the work of irony as a destabilizing mechanism inherent in language. Instead of looking at literature through preestablished categories, and cultural boundaries, attending to the rhetorical register prompts us to ask how such categories may come to be reconstituted through reading. The West does not remain intact in the encounter with this other "other"—it takes on a different cadence and becomes estranged from itself. This critique of Western democracy in both its thematic and formal aspects—staged from a space outside Western Europe and its colonies—is what becomes audible in the "long silences" of Conrad's language.

Countries of Degraded Form

Reading Gombrowicz

How could I, a Pole, believe in theories? . . . Those plains, open to every wind, had long been the scene of a great compromise between Form and its Degradation.

WITOLD GOMBROWICZ, *A Kind of Testament*

If the frames of intelligibility appear to be determined in advance, on what terms and by what means does one come to be heard? Repeatedly confronted by women, minority, colonized, and politically silenced writers, this question has fueled, in turn, feminist, ethnic studies, and postcolonial efforts to rethink the basic categories of humanistic inquiry. This question also intimately concerns the situation of what Witold Gombrowicz has called “secondary European cultures”—the impossible position of always having arrived too late, of someone else already having set the terms. “Instead of ‘Poland,’” he offered, “put the Argentine, Canada, Romania, and so on, and you’ll see that my allusions (and my sufferings) can be applied to most of the globe.”¹ Through Gombrowicz’s work, this chapter traces connections between what are often considered to be purely aesthetic operations of literature on the one hand and the condition of so-called minor or marginal cultures on the other hand. Gombrowicz’s concept of Form—which links aesthetics with the everyday, and which enables us to think about what appear to be merely political and social categories in formal and aesthetic terms—estranges the by now customary questions: On what conditions do we come to hear others? By what means do we grant them recognition, visibility, access?

Gombrowicz first elaborates an implicit theory of Form in *Ferdydurke*, published in Poland in 1937.² The novel follows a thirty-year-old writer who is visited by a teacher of literature, taken for a schoolboy,

abducted, and forced to go back to school; the central problem then becomes how to extricate himself from the form of immaturity imposed on him.³ After the book's mixed reception, Gombrowicz's career was interrupted in the summer of 1939, when he found himself stranded in Buenos Aires during the Nazi and Soviet invasions of Poland. World War II and the subsequent Soviet control of the country made his return impossible and his exile permanent. Yet his writing, although sporadic and impeded by financial difficulties, continued to develop the problem of form in several more novels and plays, and in the *Diary, 1953–1969*, originally serialized in the Polish émigré monthly *Kultura* published in Paris. Ostensibly nonfictional but written in a variety of voices and styles, the *Diary* served as a lifeline connecting Gombrowicz with intellectuals in Poland and with Polish émigré circles scattered abroad. In 1963, he finally left Argentina to spend a year in Berlin at the invitation of the Ford Foundation, and he remained in Europe until his death in 1969. It was only in the last few years of his life that he received some unquestioned recognition as a writer, with some renown after successful productions of his plays in Sweden and France and with the award of the Prix International de Littérature in 1967. In *A Kind of Testament*, finally, an interview conducted by Dominique de Roux, Gombrowicz comments on his oeuvre work by work, addressing himself explicitly to Western readers and articulating most directly the predicament of secondary cultures.

The double location (or, rather, dislocation) in Poland and Argentina thoroughly informs Gombrowicz's theory of Form—elaborated from this vantage point but not always solely, or even explicitly, concerned with cultural marginalization—and his persistent inquiry into the conditions of legibility of literature. As he wrote in the *Diary*, “the dilemma of Polish art” was whether “To be a pale moon shining with borrowed light, to be second-rate, conventional, vapid, cheaply provincial and inflated—or to sail out onto the broadest waters in fearless confrontation with the world, to earn the right to the fullest existence possible?”⁴ At first glance, the dilemma appears to map onto the distinction between devotion to the peripheral nation and aspiration to universality, with “the fullest existence possible” available to those who move beyond parochial concerns and into a properly European, primary space. But, Gombrowicz observes elsewhere, for members of secondary cultures and thus also for Polish writers, the latter was a false choice: “They could limit themselves to Polish ground, but were thereby condemned to play a secondary role; or they could aspire to

a European role, but in this case they were still condemned to a secondary role, because they were merely second-hand Europeans, they could only try to equal Europe and repeat Europe.”⁵ Either way, one remained subordinate; choosing between the national and the European frame amounted merely to choosing between two existing sets of constraints—it meant, in other words, choosing merely a frame of intelligibility through which one would be assigned one’s place and would secure one’s meaningfulness. The right to the “fullest existence” was not something to be granted by Europe, and “the broadest waters” meant something beyond it: refusing preestablished frames altogether. Gombrowicz’s explorations of Form and his reflections on the conditions of readability are, then, mutually implicated; and the question of readability contains from the beginning both an aesthetic and a radical political dimension.

This chapter will elucidate Gombrowicz’s theory of socio-aesthetic Form by arguing that it must be understood not as an objective quality that inheres in the literary work or that belongs exclusively to the domain of literature, but as a subjective relation that emerges through reading. The questions of what it means to read and what is at stake in *being* read, in turn, will be crucial for illuminating what it means, for a marginal writer, to attain the fullest existence possible. This relational notion of form, in its implication with reading, is radically different from the formalist conception manifest in recent thinking in literary studies, especially in post-Eurocentric inquiries in world literature and comparative literature. It departs from the common formalist association of form with aesthetics and high culture and questions its distinction from content, variously aligned with politics, history, culture, or theme. Because politics tends to be privileged in approaches to noncanonical literary traditions while aesthetics often remains the province of acknowledged “masterpieces,” this distinction between aesthetic form and thematic content has become especially problematic in literary studies “after Eurocentrism.”

In what follows, I will argue that the difficulty of reading implicit in Gombrowicz’s theory of Form also afflicts the expanding field of literary studies in its recent post-Eurocentric, or worldly, orientations. This difficulty emerged as a central concern when the question of *what* to read became inextricable from the question of *how* to read. But just as it came to be acknowledged, the problem of reading was almost immediately displaced. It shifted, on the one hand, onto the procedure of interpretation—which here, in this expanding literary field, has

meant delineating and determining ever-new objects, asking how their proper places and meanings might be settled, and establishing, thereby, noncanonical and non-Western works' proper frames of intelligibility. And the problem of reading shifted as well onto the question of admiration—that is, of literary value. Here, solutions have included either extending the existing system of value to the previously undervalued, in order to make it possible to appreciate the newly included texts on the same terms as, or at least alongside, the canonical, or bypassing the system of literary value to develop separate criteria of appreciation altogether. Even more insidiously, reading itself has been declared a time-consuming luxury for scholars suddenly confronted with an infinite field, now busy with problems of classification and scale.

In this momentary reappearance of the difficulty of reading, moreover, the question of readability has been confined all too readily to the noncanonical. In this post-Eurocentric moment, we think we know what reading is as long as we deal with writers and texts that come with rich traditions of having been read or, at least, read in a hegemonic way that affirms those traditions. This presumption—that the problem of readability might be confined to discrete texts a priori defined as “other”—has had the effect of affirming the canonical traditions as the place where the question of reading is already settled, displacing uncertainty onto the culturally other texts.

From the perspective of Gombrowicz's concept of Form, both the impasses and the openings of this ongoing inquiry into aesthetics and politics of literature “after Eurocentrism” become visible. Placing Gombrowicz's work in conversation with this critical environment, in the second part of this chapter, will help shift the terms of a debate that has been focused on expanding the canon in order to include the previously excluded but that should, instead, be focused on the problem of reading. From this perspective, the evasion of reading—what Paul de Man has termed “the resistance to theory”—will be seen to occur not merely in ethnic, postcolonial, or cultural studies as pitted against traditional literary studies.⁶ It will be seen to operate within literary studies as well.

READING AND FORM

Running through Gombrowicz's *Diary* as well as through his fictional works is a persistent questioning of the possibility of a direct relation

to art and to the broader social field. At the heart of this questioning lies an open secret: that admiration of a painting in a museum or ardent applause at a concert can often be a mere gesture, having more to do with the pursuit of prestige than with authentic excitement. Taking this as the norm rather than as an accidental failing of a few, Gombrowicz examines the very conditions of readability of literature and culture: What does it mean to *really* read something, to see, to understand? The entire apparatus of cultural value rests on the assumption that we know how—on the assumption that authentic appreciation and understanding are possible, and that—the open secret notwithstanding—applause and admiration may *also* well be the outward expressions of inner delight and communion with a work of art that we prefer to take them for.

But what if we do not, after all, know how to read, look, listen? And what if no one delights? These are rhetorical questions—and dramatic in consequences if taken literally. In the *Diary*, they return now and again. In a 1958 entry, for example, Gombrowicz describes leafing through an album of photographs from an acquaintance's visits to European capitals. "We did not see much . . . instead we conducted an inventory," he reports on their effort to take it all in—failed, despite their *comme il faut* professions of enthusiasm. The Cathedral of Chartres, Michelangelo—these are not looked at but, rather, inventoried: "We sated ourselves on these riches, practically without looking . . . trusting that someone must exist, after all, who *has* examined these things. Take this Giotto fresco. I cannot devote too much time to it, but I trust, I trust that *someone else* has, has examined it. . . . Here, however, I was surprised by a deadly thought: what if that someone else did not exist? What if *each person* shifts this burden of examining onto another person and what if this delight is passed from hand to hand, pushing it into nothingness?"⁷ Such a possibility would have grave repercussions for the very idea of aesthetic experience—or at least it would prompt a rethinking of our relationship to art.

It is puzzling to hear from Gombrowicz the writer that literature is subject to the same fate as other artifacts of high culture. The difficulty of appreciating it manifests itself, at first, in a most ordinary sense: reading is partial, he tells us, and constantly interrupted. In an extended digression in *Ferdydurke*, its author interrupts his own narrative to ask: "Doesn't the reader assimilate parts only, and only partly at that? He reads a part . . . then stops, only to resume reading another piece later. . . . Quite often he'll read a couple of segments then toss

the book aside . . . because something else came to his mind. . . . Oh, horrid parts! Is this why we [writers] construct a whole, so that a particle of a part of the reader will absorb a particle of a part of the work, and only partly at that?”⁸ But the threat of distraction is not the only obstacle to adequate interpretation—which is to say, to grasping the whole of a work in order to arrive at a fixed determination of its meaning. Reading is also boring. One day, Gombrowicz picks up Kafka’s *The Trial* in an attempt to read it. “Even this time, though, I could not read the book all the way through,” he confesses. “I am dazzled by the sun of its brilliant metaphor . . . but to read page after page is entirely beyond me. Some day we will know why in our century so many great artists wrote so many unreadable [masterpieces]. And how in the world these unreadable and unread books have influenced our century, all the same.”⁹ Great art, including great literature, appears to stand as a sphere apart, impenetrable and closed, but not because it contains an inaccessible enigma. One disavowed truth about literature is that it fails to entice. It lacks appeal.

The reader (if, in light of these sobering reflections, such a thing may still be said to exist) is reminded of a scene in *Ferdydurke*, where a high school teacher exhorts his class: “Why does [the Polish poet] Słowacki inspire our love and admiration? . . . Because, gentlemen, Słowacki—oh, what a great poet he was!”¹⁰ If students are slow to learn the lesson—that Słowacki was a great poet because he inspires love, and that he inspires love because he was a great poet—it is because they are “ignoramuses.” So they are given a homework assignment to explain why they admire Słowacki. But at this point Gałkiewicz, one of the students, “fidgeted and groaned: ‘But I don’t admire it at all! Not at all! It doesn’t interest me in the least! I read two verses—and I’m already bored. God help me, how am I supposed to admire it when I don’t admire it?’”¹¹ The situation escalates, the student refuses to back down, the teacher implores him to stop (evoking his wife and child as a last resort), until a good pupil volunteers to recite the correct lesson so well that “after a quarter-of-an-hour even Gałkiewicz groaned that he’d had enough, that he gets it, that he retracts all he said and agrees with everything.” The teacher gloats: “See, Gałkiewicz? There’s nothing like school to inculcate the adoration of great genius!”¹²

And so, beset with the threat of partiality and blocked by the obligation to admire, reading appears elusive, nearly impossible. In these scenes—the scene of (not) looking at European artworks, the scene of (not) reading Kafka, and the scene of failing to admire—adoration

is detached from its objects and detached as well from any idea of thoughtful communion with art. Instead of being a properly aesthetic, spontaneous response, admiration belongs rather to the interpersonal, social dimension. Having more to do with the circulation of cultural value than with an authentic self expressing authentic enjoyment, it is *also* detached from any idea of an admiring subject.

This mechanism—revealed through Gombrowicz’s arresting suspicion that “this someone else [who has really looked and who really admires] does not exist”—corresponds to what Slavoj Žižek has termed *interpassivity*: a fetishistic displacement of feelings and beliefs onto an other, who is in turn supposed to feel or to believe for us.¹³ This other may be a person or a thing, and Žižek’s prime examples of *interpassivity* include the phenomenon of “canned laughter” embedded in the soundtrack of a television sitcom (which relieves us of the obligation to laugh by doing it for us), or of designated weepers at a funeral (who cry on command and onto whom the mourners’ obligation to externalize their feelings is displaced). The paradigmatic instance of this delegation of experience is “the subject supposed to believe,” a fundamental feature of the symbolic order that amounts to the substitution of a signifier for a subject. “The subject who directly believes need not exist for the belief to be operative.” Instead, the belief requires only “some ultimate guarantor of it, yet this guarantor is always deferred, displaced. . . . It suffices to presuppose its existence—to believe in it, in the guise of either the mythological founding figure who is not part of our experiential reality, or the impersonal ‘one’ (‘one believes’)” (4). This mechanism of displacement applies not only to belief but also to “every one of the subject’s innermost feelings and attitudes, including crying and laughing”—and, in our case, admiring (5).

Put in Žižek’s terms, we might say that Gombrowicz’s startling realization—that *everyone* may put the burden of seeing on someone else—posits “a subject supposed to admire” (or even “a subject supposed to have read”): one supposed to see and to delight *for* us, so that no actual admiration or even contemplation needs to take place in order for admiration as a signifier to operate. This displacement is necessarily disavowed, so that admiration appears to the contemplating person as truly his or her own. The *Diary* is full of scenes of visits to museums, concert halls, lectures, and readings that foreground this operation of applause as a mere signifier substituting for genuine aesthetic pleasure. In these scenes, Gombrowicz directs unspoken thoughts to his fellow admirers:

You think that you are getting close to art voluntarily, enticed by its beauty, that this intimacy is taking place in an atmosphere of freedom and that delight is being born in you spontaneously, lured by the divine rod of Beauty. In truth, a hand has grabbed you by the scruff of the neck, led you to this painting and has thrown you to your knees. A will mightier than your own told you to attempt to experience the appropriate emotions. Whose hand and whose will? That hand is not the hand of a single man, the will is collective, born in the interhuman dimension, quite alien to you. So you do not admire at all, you merely try to admire.¹⁴

Admiration deferred onto a subject supposed to admire (that is, admiration operating as a signifier detached from any actual subject) comes, in turn, to dictate what appear to be our innermost feelings. This is the mechanism of interpersonal Form: just as we ascribe beliefs, feelings, and attitudes to others, so they impute them to us. We, in turn, assume them as our own and act accordingly.

To put it differently, in the museum scene Gombrowicz confronts us with the fact that we are, continually and in each situation, taken for someone (else) and so we become what we are taken for, all the while disavowing this operation of interpersonal Form and taking it, instead, for an expression of our authentic selves. "We are forced to be as others see us, and to manifest ourselves through them,"¹⁵ but, paradoxically, the more closely we follow the (in any case unavoidable) forms imposed by others and the more we identify with them, the more inauthentic we become and the more visible the operation of Form appears—just as in the example of the waiter in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, whose movement is "a little too precise, a little too rapid," so that he turns into a caricature of a waiter all the more he embraces being a waiter.¹⁶ This denial of one's own freedom is the crux of bad faith, a constitutive and inescapable condition of embracing the momentary facticity of the determined thing ("waiter") over the transcendence of being. As Sartre writes, the public demands that "there [be] the dance of the grocer, of the tailor, of the auctioneer, by which they . . . persuade their clientele that they are nothing but a grocer, an auctioneer, a tailor. A grocer who dreams is offensive to the buyer, because such a grocer is not wholly a grocer."¹⁷

Here, Gombrowicz would add that a buyer who dreams is equally offensive to the grocer. They constitute each other, so that the grocer is no more inauthentic than the buyer—so that the buyer *as* the buyer no more preexists the grocer than the grocer preexists the buyer. If Sartre

is concerned with the constitution of individual subjectivity, Gombrowicz emphasizes the interpersonal relation. Moreover—and this is where the significance of Gombrowicz’s notion of Form in its *aesthetic* dimension begins to be intelligible—they impose on each other not merely the respective forms of the grocer and the buyer but the forms of the *solicitous* grocer and the *entitled* buyer or, for instance, the forms of the *lecherous* grocer and the *prudish* buyer. The two are not merely preexisting social roles or identities dictated by class or gender and determined for us in advance. Such social positions do participate in the operation of Form, but the problematic of identity and resistance—or the problem of seamless complicity with that which is not of our making—goes beyond fixed positions and types.

Putting both interhuman relations and individual experience *in terms of* form distinguishes Gombrowicz’s insights from Žižek’s or Sartre’s theories of subjectivity because it takes into account its aesthetic dimension. This dimension, in turn, makes space for a kind of uncontrollable contingency that nonetheless lends itself to control—space for the recognition of the unintentional (because governed by Form) aspect of experience that still allows some degree of intentionality. Because “form penetrates us to the marrow,” as Gombrowicz consistently endeavors to show, “we only have to change our tone of voice for certain things within ourselves to become inexpressible—we can no longer think them, or even feel them.”¹⁸ Each form, once established—often through accidental detail and for no good reason at all—demands to be followed through; each form, once imposed, dictates action. Gombrowicz’s work is dedicated, first, to revealing the primacy of form in constituting experience and the operation of what he calls the “formal imperative to completeness,” and, second, to exploring the possibilities of exercising freedom, or agency, *from within* the constraints of Form. Literary language is, precisely, the site of this exploration—not because of a liberating potential of the literary in itself as a sphere set apart from the quotidian but, on the contrary, *because* of a fundamental affinity between literature and the everyday.

Gombrowicz’s conception of Form, which concerns the strictly artistic and the literary alongside the interpersonal and the social, has few precedents in the history of the concept. It is so singular that the historian and philosopher of art Władysław Tatarkiewicz placed it in a category of its own, apart from classical conceptions. These conceptions, developed between the antiquity and the eighteenth century, include form as the arrangement and proportion of parts forming a whole (as

opposed to the parts or elements themselves); form as what is directly given to the senses (as opposed to content, or meaning, especially in poetry); form as the boundary or contour of an object (as opposed to matter or the material from which the object is made); form as the Aristotelian conceptual essence of an object (as opposed to its accidental, contingent features); and form as the Kantian subjective contribution of the mind to the object (as opposed to what is objectively given). Gombrowicz's notion of Form as an interhuman rule or law—for Tatarkiewicz, opposed to freedom, life, and individuality—that is governed by stylistic principles stands apart from most established notions.

Tatarkiewicz points out that Gombrowicz's Form—"seldom found in the old texts on aesthetics"—may have only two direct precedents.¹⁹ The first is Diderot's contention that a sketch is more pleasing than a painting "because there is more life in it, and less of form. As form is brought in, so life fades away." The second precedent is Friedrich von Schiller's notion of *Formtrieb*, the drive to form, which is itself inspired by Kant and which appears to be evoked in Gombrowicz's own statement that the most important conflict in culture "is between two basic strivings: one desires form, shape, definition, the other defends itself from form, doesn't want form. Humanity . . . must continually define itself and continually escape its own definitions. Reality is not something that can be wholly enclosed in form."

The singularity of Gombrowicz's notion of form lies in its departure from the exclusive concern with works of art and in its capacity to link together the aesthetic and the social, or everyday, dimensions of experience. In "Preface to 'The Child Runs Deep in Filodor,'" one of the two self-conscious digressions from the main story in *Ferdydurke*, Gombrowicz addresses fellow writers and artists directly:

You seem to think . . . that art consists of creating works perfect in their form; you reduce this all-encompassing, omni-human process of creating form to the turning out of poems and symphonies. . . . You still seem to think that emotions, instincts, ideas govern our behavior, while you're inclined to consider form to be a superficial appendage. . . . But in Reality . . . a human being does not express himself forthrightly and in keeping with his nature but always in some well-defined form, and this form . . . this manner of being is not of our making but is thrust upon us from outside. . . . It creates something in us that is not of us. . . . For you, however, Form and Style still belong strictly to the realm of

the aesthetic—for you style is on paper only, in the style of your stories.²⁰

Such a formalist displacement of the all-encompassing problem of form onto the problem of style—that is, treating form only in terms of a shape, contour, or adornment given to a content that may be said to be authentic, or in any case to preexist form and to be distinguishable from it—underlies both the commonplace separation of literature from “reality” and the unexamined displacement of our obligation to engage with works of art onto admiration. But, writes Gombrowicz, “the fact that . . . ‘people mutually force themselves to admire art’ (although no one is so directly enchanted by it) certainly does not undermine the value of art. *Except that it works differently than we suppose.*”²¹ The possibility of a direct relation to cultural artifacts requires, precisely, the recognition that they are not merely representations, more or less adequate, of our collective emotions and ideas. It requires the recognition that form constitutes both art and reality—reality meaning interpersonal relations and intimate individual experience as much as collective dimensions of politics and history.

Interpersonal Form, the precondition of any relation, is thus not a matter of defining oneself with respect to a monolithic social totality and not a matter of con-forming to a set of abstract norms embedded in the social order. More insidiously than that, as Gombrowicz writes in *Ferdydurke*, one faces “a whole ocean of opinions, each one defining you within someone else, and creating you in another man’s soul. It’s as if you were being born inside a thousand souls that are too tight-fitting for comfort!”²² The imperative of interpersonal Form is “to be naïve because someone who is naïve thinks you are naïve—to be silly because some silly person thinks you are silly—to be green because someone who is immature dunks and bathes you in greenness of his own—ah, that could drive you crazy, were it not for the little word ‘ah,’ which somehow lets you go on living!”²³

The enigmatic effect of “ah!” (How *does* the little word make all the difference?) will, precisely, be tied to the function of reading, which affords the possibility of reworking Form from within. As Gombrowicz inquires into the conditions of readability of works of art and literature, he reveals the operation of Form not only in its coercive aspect but also in moments of opening, even reprieve—that is, in momentary glimpses of the loosening of fixed forms. In this context, the very recognition of

the fundamentally alien, interhuman character of admiration provides space enough—like “the little word ‘ah,’ which somehow lets you go on living”—to detach admiration from the idea of reading (or looking, or understanding) and to ask what reading *otherwise* than in the mode of admiration might mean.

If admiration is a displacement of reading, then interpretation may appear, in contrast, to result from irreproachably sincere attempts to understand a literary work. But Gombrowicz’s fraught relationship to his own readers and critics shows that it is equally problematic to identify reading with interpretation. “I have not been completely understood,” he writes in a 1957 entry in the *Diary*, “or rather they have extracted from me only what is ‘timely’ and corresponds to their current history and current predicament.”²⁴ This particular complaint is directed at the reception of *Ferdydurke* in Poland, which at the time of its publication was appraised as “the ravings of a madman,” only to be “elevated to the rank of satire and criticism” twenty years later, in the changed political circumstances of Soviet-dominated Poland. In the *Diary*, Gombrowicz returns again and again to reflect on his commentators’ misunderstandings and to supplement their always-wanting interpretations of his literary works. His interlocutors and targets are, at first, critics and reviewers in Poland as well as those in exile, associated with the Parisian *Kultura* and with the rival émigré journal *Wiadomości* appearing in London. Later, they will be joined by his admirers and detractors in Argentina, and—as Gombrowicz becomes a contender for international literary prizes—those in Western Europe as well. In interviews in *A Kind of Testament*, Gombrowicz addresses explicitly his French—and, more generally, Western—readers. “My view of Form has often been interpreted somewhat narrowly,” he says. “It is generally reduced to the idea that men shape each other. This is a little too simple.”²⁵ Gombrowicz’s notion of form is at the center of these frequent misunderstandings. It is so difficult to apprehend in part because the connection between its socio-political and aesthetic aspects, conventionally separated into “reality” and its representation, into content and style, is so elusive.

It may be tempting to resolve the difficulty by taking stock of what Gombrowicz himself—in what appear to be the plain-language passages of the *Diary* and of *A Kind of Testament*—has left us: to carefully extract his expositions and corrections, to painstakingly supplement them with what the properly literary texts might tell us, and to achieve, thereby, a more complete understanding of just *what* he meant by

Form. As Gombrowicz himself puts it in a letter to the Polish literary critic Artur Sandauer, “My views make up an organic whole. . . . My attitude to art or to the nation, or to other similar matters, is simply the branching of a tree whose root is my concept of form.”²⁶ Every reader, then, is compelled to unearth this root, to ask how such diverse topics as Polish nationalism or the politics of the literary establishment are connected through the subterranean workings of Form. But his persistent dissatisfaction with readers and critics—even derisive dismissal—makes for a daunting reading: anyone who attempts it seems bound to fail, to *misread* again. Anyone who takes up the task makes an implicit promise to offer a more astute interpretation.

And yet even the most comprehensive (and especially the comprehensive!) elucidation of the complexity of Form risks rebuke when it comes too close to a system. “Sometimes, reading these articles, I forget that I am, after all, an artist,” Gombrowicz complains about his critical reception. “I begin to believe that I am the author of a multi-volumed philosophical work. . . . There is constant talk about my ‘concepts,’ almost never about my art.”²⁷ Paradoxically, then, it seems that, in busying themselves with defining the concept of form as it emerges from Gombrowicz’s work, his critics have neglected to notice the very forms that that work itself takes or, even more precisely, the work of form in his writing. In a seminal article entitled “The Concept of ‘Form’ in Gombrowicz,” for example, Polish scholar Jerzy Jarzębski explains that “‘form’ is here most clearly the ‘form of language,’ dialect, maybe even custom. The use of ‘form’ in reference to the composition and style of a literary work is self-evident.”²⁸ Having declared obvious, in a few lines, the properly literary meaning of form as a familiar matter of composition and style, Jarzębski proceeds to outline in detail its more unusual philosophical, psychological, and sociological dimensions.

“This criticism is like a finger put to a quivering string,” Gombrowicz contends, referring to the “pseudo-scientific” pretensions of his commentators. “It kills the vibrations.”²⁹ It is this peculiar noncommunication between his fictional works on the one hand (which contain, according to him, the full meaning of Form) and the interpretations of these works on the other hand (which so easily lose sight of that meaning, most importantly of the properly literary or aesthetic dimension of Form) that must give us pause. Instead of pursuing the content of his expository reflections as the locus of the correct meaning of Form—reflections that offer themselves as the final word—I want to call attention to the very impasse produced by Gombrowicz’s own

incessant exegeses, and to the very *fact* of his own tireless supplementation, even doubling, of the work he already performs in his novels and plays. Gombrowicz's insistence that his readers—the well intentioned *and* the adversarial—fail to understand him returns us to the questions about reading itself: What does it mean—and what does it take—to *really* read a literary work? Why do literary texts require commentary—and what does this say about their capacity to stand on their own and to speak for themselves? Should the reader be found wanting in discernment? Or is the literary text somehow—perhaps constitutively—lacking in perfection, incapable on its own of stemming the tide of misreading it provokes in the first place? Here is the contradiction of Gombrowicz's repeated attempts to offer correct readings: the literary work, fragile and defenseless, requires commentary. But the commentary, in turn—even as it presents itself as definitive—cannot stand alone because, accorded independent status, it would annihilate the work and render it superfluous. What's worse, the crucial remainder that persists in going unnoticed and unarticulated does not, finally, come to be revealed in Gombrowicz's own expositions. His sense of this problem emerges when he confesses to the difficulty inherent in writing the *Diary*: “I want to be able to translate myself into ordinary language. But—*traduttore, traditore*. Here I betray myself.”³⁰ The secret of Form—if there is one—is sealed in his literary writing.

These contradictions arise directly from Gombrowicz's own effort to explain in plain language the implications of his concept of form. In what follows, I take them as a point of departure, in order to suggest that this incapacity to fully define form through ever more careful articulations is a function of Form itself. Rather than being an objective attribute of the text, Form in its aesthetic dimension inheres in the process of reading—in the ongoing “vibrations” of the text. While Gombrowicz himself and his critics rightfully acknowledge form as central to his work, the concern with reading appears, at best, accidental and remains unelaborated. I argue that it is precisely the vital connection between form and reading that goes missing in the passage from the literary text to its interpretation, in the move to the hermeneutic register. And I want to shift emphasis away from a sole focus on form as something objectively definable in order to supplement it with reading, and, in light of this shift, show that what is at stake in Gombrowicz's writing is not simply an idiosyncratic nuanced definition of literary form. At stake, more significantly, is the question of the readability of literature and, more generally, of

culture—and a laborious, single-minded effort to lay bare the very conditions of that readability.

Reading, then, must be thoroughly distinguished from interpretation. While interpretation calls for synthesis, that is, for a stable arrangement of parts into a whole that might lend itself to the attribution of a necessarily supratextual meaning, reading is the more primary process of apprehension: extended in time, chaotic, undirected, resistant to synthesis. The aesthetic dimension of Form, understood through its implication with reading and thus in isolation from both admiration and interpretation, will not simply be one dimension alongside others in Gombrowicz's complex conceptualization. The aesthetic dimension provides, rather, the crucial link between all of the particular manifestations of Form and, at the same time, an opening for Form's undoing. Put differently, the aesthetic dimension of Form, which lays bare the process of figuration, is a salutary—but not, by the same token, reassuring—remedy for the otherwise detrimental, often-invisible operations of Form in everyday life. Gombrowicz's writing makes manifest the movement into and out of form, in order to "isolate the deep current of Form so that it should appear as such, like a black river following its own course, opaque and troubled, concealing the ever new and unfathomable potentialities. . . . When your direct perception of Form as a creative force will have asserted itself . . . we will then understand how terrible its dynamism is."³¹ It is, precisely, through reading that a direct perception of Form can assert itself, in the process not only of witnessing the stifling, absolutely defining effect of particular forms—be it Innocence, Modernity, or Naturalness—that in Gombrowicz's works are often taken to absurd and horrifying extremes but also of witnessing the process of coming into form, that is, the process of figuration.

If art "works differently than we suppose"—in distinction from admiration as well as in distinction from interpretation, which produces only a proliferation of stable meanings and accordingly stable objects—it works precisely through the denudement of the operation of Form, made perceptible through reading. "Because reading is no less creative than writing," for Gombrowicz, the reader is a cocreator of the work.³² Kant's idea of beautiful form elaborated in *The Critique of Judgment*, in its insistence on the contemplation of art as a subjective relation, will help illuminate the work of Form in Gombrowicz's writing and its implication with reading.³³ As Rodolphe Gasché emphasizes, Kant's idea of beautiful, or mere, form is entirely distinct from the more common formalist and aestheticist understandings of art that tend to separate form

and content; that conceive of form as an objectively perceptible attribute of the artwork; and that take it to mean the delineation, outline, or design that pleases the senses by its harmony or its perfection. When properly understood—in what Gasché terms its para-epistemic, or paracognitive, function—Kant’s notion of form “no longer concerns the constitution of things themselves. Rather . . . the exclusive concern of form is the constitution of the objects of experience.”³⁴ Kant’s aesthetic judgment is concerned not primarily with works of art but with nature: when confronted with things “for which no determined concepts are available, and whose purpose cannot be made out”—and, thus, where ordinary cognition fails—aesthetic judgment “secures the meaningfulness of the unexplained phenomena, by bestowing this [formal] unity upon them, and it thereby permits their subsequent observation and investigation.”³⁵ Because “the conditions of possibility of objects are the conditions of possibility of experience in general,” the subjective attribution of form to an unknown, undetermined phenomenon makes it possible for it to become an object of experience at all.³⁶ The Kantian notion of aesthetic experience, therefore, is situated primarily in nature and in everyday life, rather than in the realm of high culture—and so, by definition, it concerns the possibility of knowledge in general rather than the specialized appreciation of objects that have been determined as works of art.

Artworks are so far from being the privileged objects of aesthetic judgment, in fact, that they may become subject to aesthetic judgment only under certain circumstances; any determination of an object *as* a beautiful object, as a masterpiece, or as a perfect example of a genre already makes aesthetic judgment impossible. Because viewing works of art *as* works of art already entails a determining judgment, one that draws on existing concepts, “beautiful form can be predicated of art objects only if they are not viewed as works of art.”³⁷ The kind of sighting required for aesthetic judgment to take place involves, instead, as Kant puts it, looking at the object “as poets do, merely by what strikes the eye”—so that, since the attribution of form is a subjective process and does not say anything about the object itself, the undetermined object remains undetermined. When artworks are capable of giving rise to aesthetic judgment—when they exhibit “not regularity but instead a certain irregularity, especially that of a prodigality bordering on luxuriance,” and when they are “inhabited by a certain wildness” that cannot be encompassed in any existing concept—they function “as reflections on the necessary requisites for becoming an object; more precisely, as *staging the minimal conditions that must be*

met for a material manifold to be recognizable as having the form of an object."³⁸

If, for Kant, mere form has a para-epistemic function, this function—somewhat paradoxically—is to pave the way for the possibility of integrating the unexplained phenomenon under aesthetic judgment into ordinary experience and thus of subjecting it, in the end, to determining judgment. The attribution of mere form, in other words, assures a minimum of cognizability, which in turn prevents the complete failure of our mental faculties. The subjective attribution of mere form, in Kant's words, "ascribes nothing to the object (of nature), but only represents the peculiar way in which we must proceed in reflection upon the objects of nature in reference to a thoroughly connected experience."³⁹ Even if the purpose of aesthetic judgment is "merely securing the possibility of a (thoroughly coherent) experience"—even if it does not, by itself, actually incorporate the beautiful thing into ordinary experience—it ultimately works in the service of coherent cognition.⁴⁰ Its purpose is to make way for its potential incorporation into experience, to return it to the ordinary.

It is, precisely, this para-epistemic operation of beautiful form—its elusive revelation of the very conditions of cognition, and its ultimately affirmative (although, also, momentarily disturbing) function with respect to the perceiving subject's coherence—that helps one appreciate the aesthetic operation of form in Gombrowicz's work. In his work, a formalist notion of form—understood as an internalized determination that is always difficult to escape—is explicitly thematized. This is the interpersonal, social form that defines each of us "in a thousand ill-fitting souls" and that, once assumed, dictates thought and action. But at the same time Gombrowicz's work is focused on maintaining in view, precisely, the moment of indeterminacy, the opportune if fleeting glimpses of de-formation and of degradation of Form. It is in these moments that the aesthetic operation of mere form calls attention to itself. Gombrowicz's literary work makes manifest the conditions of determination and aims to reveal the very *threshold* of determination—the tipping point between the moment when objects still exceed definite concepts and the moment when they come to be encompassed by them. Several apparently distinct gestures may be seen in Gombrowicz's writing: one shows moments of objects coming into form, when determination may still be staved off; another reveals particular forms taken to the extreme and thus brought to the point of breaking; another still endeavors to maintain indeterminacy as long as possible. These

gestures not only serve the function of laying bare the operation of Form, in order to show—through the subjective relation of reading—its ever-present, inescapable working. They also make visible the rigidity as well as the suppleness of Form, in order to reveal its precise hold and—if it cannot be escaped—at least the possibilities of reworking it.

It is quite tempting, because of this overt thematization and because of this Form's undesirable effect, to distinguish the operation of interpersonal Form in the social dimension from the operation of beautiful form in the literary text, and to think of the coercive interpersonal Form as becoming undone through the mere form—in Kant's sense—of the beautiful, indeterminate objects in Gombrowicz's fictional works. Yet, despite the clarity that such a separation of interpersonal and aesthetic form may afford, they cannot be so neatly severed. This is precisely Gombrowicz's contribution: to conceive of literature otherwise than in terms of representation and, in turn, to find "reality" itself to be governed by the formal imperative to completeness, which dictates the coherence of the reading, perceiving, and interacting subject as much as that of a literary work. We are created by Form—forced to assume one particular form at any given moment—and constituted through a multitude of momentary relations to others, rather than in relation to an authentic self. The same mechanism, Gombrowicz reminds us in *Ferdydurke*, regulates the production of a literary work: "Whatever you put down on paper dictates what comes next, because the work is not born of you. . . . Parts tend to wholeness, every part surreptitiously makes its way toward the whole, strives for roundness, and seeks fulfillment, it implores the rest to be created in its own image and likeness. . . . If only to save some semblance of paternity we must, with all the moral power at our disposal, try to resemble our work, but it doesn't want to resemble us."⁴¹ Although Gombrowicz is referring to a work of literature, the same is exactly the case for any other "work" we may want to call ours—including the work of fashioning ourselves in one way rather than another, the work of presenting ourselves to the world, in order to become intelligible to others. Just as an accidentally assumed heroic tone in a novel comes to govern not only the stylistic unity of the rest of the work but also the characters' fate, so apparently innocent (and *equally* stylistic) details come to govern behavior.

The conventional distinction between the aesthetic form of an artwork and the coercive form of the interhuman dimension might be productively displaced, then, onto a distinction between Form (in its irreducibly social-aesthetic dimension, as the principle governing both

reality and art) and figuration (the coming into form in its coimplication with reading, in which the “direct perception of Form as a creative force [asserts] itself”). Reading will, precisely, be a process that makes visible the constitution of objects of experience and that, in much of Gombrowicz’s work, calls attention to itself as such.

This work of figuration—that is, of coming into form—definitively severs reading from interpretation. Here is a vignette from the *Diary* describing a hot day in the Argentine countryside—so hot that objects lose their contours and melt into each other—when Sergio, the young heir of the estate, rides a horse. But instead of riding it decisively and wholeheartedly as a young heir should, he scandalizes the party by his deliberate indefiniteness: “To the amazement of not only his parents, but also the entire *estancia*, he did not quite get on his horse, and not quite galloped after which he somewhat dismounted and went to his room, just like that, not quite enough.”⁴² What is so scandalous is his ostentatious indefiniteness, indecently provoking onlookers to wonder what he is doing—or, more perversely still, revealing the mutual implication of horse-rider and onlooker, in which the unraveling of the first threatens to unravel the second.

Sergio’s prolonged indeterminacy is unbearable because it blocks established modes of relation, which depend, precisely, on determined concepts of self and other—on recognizable, unambiguous forms. But the scandal of his vague horse-riding is further amplified by the suffocating heat and by an event that has an unbearable (and formal!) resemblance to it. The event—or, rather, the not-quite event—takes place immediately after, when they encounter a crocodile on their walk. Without time to think, Witold is handed a rifle and fires at the moving shadows everyone is pointing to with alarm. Before he realizes what is happening, the crocodile has been “shot, but not sufficiently; not quite killed, hit, but not killed, but not enough . . . and now it thoroughly permeates everything around.” The horrifying incompleteness of its death, its ongoing agony, becomes thorough and overwhelms everything—so that incompleteness itself becomes a momentary determination, an unbearable form. “Sergio didn’t say anything but I knew he was game for this . . . and it didn’t surprise me at all when he not quite but already openly, flew to a branch and gave out a chirp. Why not! Now, to a certain degree, now, whatever happens, he can allow himself everything.”⁴³ The scene presents—quite literally, given the extreme heat—a mirage of forms: the stable interpersonal forms undone by unabashed de-formation; the correspondence between the

two incomplete events amplifying each other and enabling, in turn, a third, now openly absurd, event of Sergio taking on the form of a bird.

This escalation of indeterminacy is not only intentional on the part of Sergio, who first provokes it and then takes advantage of the first opportunity to embrace it fully. It is also governed by its own—non-human because formal—logic that renders the world itself eminently readable, and that draws direct lines between the hotness of the day, the vague horse-riding, and the indefinitely killed crocodile, whose incomplete death, in turn, permeates everything with its own form. The world itself, in the sequence of events as much as in the scenery, establishes correspondences that render it readable—although not, by the same token, immediately meaningful. The kind of legibility this world evinces—the “real” world now inseparable from the textual—is not one we arrive at through interpretation. Nothing more and nothing less than the interplay of forms will be revealed. Indeed, perceiving these correspondences makes the little passage in the *Diary* more absurd, *not* more intelligible, if by seeking to uncover a meaning of a story we seek a clear determination. This work of figuration obstructs the work of hermeneutics. Form tends to wholeness by its own operation, not because it imitates or seeks to represent already-given wholes in reality. The formal imperative, moreover, dictates the course of events, disregarding any claim to a faithful translation or representation of reality that might be ascribed to the text.

Simply remaining indefinite to stave off determination, then, or clinging to a detail to forestall the totalizing operation of Form, is not a suitable defense against it, because “parts [too] tend to wholeness, every part surreptitiously makes its way toward the whole, strives for roundness, and seeks fulfillment, it implores the rest to be created in its own image and likeness.”⁴⁴ Every detail, every moment of de-formation, threatens to take over and to impose a new form—a new basis for one’s relation to the world—in its turn. This threat contained in indefiniteness itself is visible already in *Ferdynurke*, which begins “at that pale and lifeless hour when night is almost gone but dawn has not yet come into its own.”⁴⁵ Having just dreamt about his adolescence, the thirty-year-old writer-narrator has a panicked sense of disintegration: “I felt that my body was not homogeneous, that some parts were still those of a boy, and that my head was laughing at my leg and ridiculing it . . . , that my finger was poking fun at my heart, my heart at my brain.”⁴⁶ Every part tends in its own direction and commands attention: just as it happens in a dream, or—I suggest—in what we might

call mere reading: the kind of sighting that reveals the constitution of objects *as* objects at all, prior to any determined meaning.

The uncertain status of these objects, revealed one at a time through the temporally extended relation of reading, makes it difficult to decide whether they belong to “reality,” to dream, or to figure of speech. Still half-immersed in sleep, the protagonist reflects: “I was halfway down the path of my life when I found myself in a dark forest. But this forest, worse luck, was green.”⁴⁷ Is the forest a metaphor chosen to convey his feeling all the more accurately, or is it rather a nightmarish confusion of a dreamful and a wakeful state, an intrusion of the dream into reality? The *fact* that the forest is green seems to make all the difference—but what difference? In the course of this first chapter of *Ferdydurke*, greenness turns into a recurring—and thus intensifying—motif: there are green insects, green swamps, green buds and sprouts. There is *being taken for green*. Its everyday, almost banal association with immaturity and youth accumulates, along the way, a buildup of tangled branches, insect wings, and grass. The dread of entanglement remains, regardless of any retroactive determination (“Aha, so this is *about* immaturity”) the reader might make. For a moment of uncertain duration, the greenness of the forest stands alone—just as a detail might figure in a dream or in a work of art, out of proportion with any discernible whole or context, prior to any significance it might be accorded.

Details are frightening because they make their own claims to wholeness. They oppose the work of hermeneutics, which depends on subordinating details to a whole, because they are potential starting points for the elaboration of new forms, new wholes. It is precisely through details that Pimko, the odious pedagogue who pays the writer a visit that very morning to take him for a schoolboy and force him back to school, traps the protagonist. “Chirp, chirp, chirp, author!” the prof coos at the sight of scattered pages of the young writer’s drafts. “Let me look it over, and encourage you.”⁴⁸ The prof, sitting professorially, starts reading aloud while the writer is also sitting, too mortified to move, and the prolonged *fact* of sitting solidifies their respective forms: “Sitting squarely on his wisdom, [Pimko] went on reading. I felt sick at the sight of him reading. My world collapsed and promptly reset itself according to the rules of a conventional prof. I could not pounce on him because I was seated, and I was seated because he was seated. For no apparent reason, sitting itself assumed prime importance and became an obstacle to everything else.”⁴⁹ Sitting, accidentally imbued with importance out of proportion with its ordinary significance, now overwhelms the protagonist, allowing Pimko

to dominate him. “I noticed that the prof was like a cow grazing on my greenness,” he laments because a form, once imposed, is difficult to escape.⁵⁰ As soon as the protagonist becomes “Józio,” a diminutive, schoolboy version of himself “diminished within someone else,” he cannot extricate himself because any protestation is taken for a sign of schoolboyish insubordination.⁵¹

This particular form is taken to its logical—and therefore absurd—consequences, as in many instances in Gombrowicz’s work. Józio goes to school, does his homework. But it is also in such scenarios of amplification and exaggeration that Form itself becomes brittle, vulnerable to de-formation. This is why the recurrent motif of the duel—the direct confrontation of opposites consolidated in the very process of interhuman interaction—is so important for revealing the operation of Form: that is where it is taken to its farthest extremes. There too an accidentally chosen detail dictates the course of events, but it is also the detail—the right detail—that may be crucial in overturning the increasingly delicate balance of opposing forms.

The formal potential of the duel, and the importance of details, recall the scene in Gustave Flaubert’s *L’education sentimentale* in which Cisy and Frédéric are forced into a duel by the sheer force of the ritual and of others’ pro forma conviction, with neither of them genuinely driven to fight to the first blood. And when Cisy, sword already in hand, faints from terror in the first moments of the duel, his second declares that he is bleeding: “In his tumble he’d grazed his left thumb.” Where the human agency of any one of the individuals involved was powerless to stop the duel, this “first blood,” spilled by accident, offers a way out without provoking a scandal as long as it can be claimed to conform to the rules. Gombrowicz finds a myriad variations on this theme, where the right detail—the smallest departure—makes all the difference.

Yet in duels and other escalations that bring Form to the brink of crisis by pitting opposites against each other the trick is not merely to do something unexpected. That alone is often already anticipated, even prescribed by Form. In *Ferdydurke*, Pimko arranges for Józio to board with an ultraprogressive, modern family and introduces him as an old-fashioned poser who likes to pretend to be an adult. While the prof and the lady of the house discuss the boy’s predicament (with the lady unable to stand such artificiality in a young person), the narrator *sits* a distance away, desperately trying to prove them wrong: “I make myself more comfortable, stretch my legs, try to sit modernly, look relaxed and daring, and I mutely cry out that it’s all untrue. . . . I bend forward, I look bright

and natural, with my whole posture I mutely belie everything . . . but I suddenly hear the Youngblood woman say quietly to Pimko: ‘You’re right, such morbid mannerisms, just look at him—he’s constantly striking poses.’”⁵² However absurd the situation, from now on it is governed by the internal logic of the form imposed on Józio, so he cannot extricate himself simply by adopting the opposite form and trying to *prove himself* to be modern, grownup, natural, and free of posturing. He will have to undermine the entire balance by finding something that defies any conceivable combination of already-prescribed postures.

The movement into and out of Form—its escalation as much as its unraveling—that becomes perceptible in Gombrowicz’s writing is directed to the single purpose of revealing its operation, while reading entails enduring the work of Form laid bare and made unbearable. This is why any *definition* of Form, such as “the idea that men shape each other,” is “a little too simple.”⁵³ Missing in such an objective proposition is the affective dimension of Form—the dread, pleasure, and delirium it provokes—as well as the temporal aspect of formation and deformation, its ongoing-ness. This laying bare can take place only in a literary work that demands mere reading—something other than a definition, an exposition, or an explication.

READING AND LITERARY VALUE

Soon after the mixed reception of *Ferdydurke* in Poland, Gombrowicz found himself stranded in Buenos Aires at the outbreak of World War II and remained there for close to thirty years, working in relative isolation and anonymity. His concern with the operation of literature as an institution, with the circulation of literary value, and with the readability of literary works is inseparable, then, from his own struggle to *be* read—which turns out to be quite distinct from the struggle for acclaim. His inquiry into conditions of legibility, moreover, belongs not only to what may be taken as a relatively marginal writer’s idiosyncratic if nuanced thinking on aesthetics. Rather, it is thoroughly informed by his consciousness of his own geopolitical (or, perhaps, geo-formal) situation in a “secondary European culture.” While the formal imperative to completeness is a universal interhuman condition, what makes Gombrowicz especially capable of addressing its problematic is his origin in the plains of Eastern Europe, which, as he writes, “open to every wind, had long been the scene of a great compromise between Form and its Degradation.”⁵⁴

From this peripheral position, from the “countries of degraded form,” the operation of Form as such is more easily revealed because there it is cracked, more open and supple. There, awareness of Form can be more acute precisely (or paradoxically) because it is more difficult to satisfy the formal imperative to completeness. “The Pole has more reasons than a Frenchman or an Englishman *not* to identify himself with his national form,” and this noncoincidence with the ill-fitting national form can be an advantage.⁵⁵ As Gombrowicz writes, “Making oneself conscious of one’s own ‘not-quiteness’ [*niedo*]—unformedness, underdevelopment, immaturity—not only does not weaken, but strengthens.”⁵⁶ While the standard English translation of the *Diary* renders “*niedo*” as “lack of,” this not-quite word is really just a pair of prefixes strung together, equivalent to the English “un-” and “-ed” in words like “unfinished” or “unformed.” Whereas “lack” is a definite absence of something, and thus lends itself to being a familiar and stable form, *niedo* signifies something less than, and something other than, lack: it is an intermediate, indefinite state full of, precisely, indefiniteness itself—much like that of the “incompletely killed” crocodile or Sergio’s “vague” horse-riding discussed earlier. For Gombrowicz, *niedo* need not be something to be hidden and transcended; as the formal condition of Eastern Europe and, by implication, of other secondary cultures, it can become the basis for an elaboration of better-fitting cultures.

It is from the standpoint of *niedo*—not even a word, and itself an unfinished concept—that, instead of chasing after Europe and forever finding themselves in the waiting-rooms of European high culture, intellectuals from secondary cultures ought to “be those who unmask. Instead of pulling yourselves up to someone else’s maturity, try . . . to reveal Europe’s immaturity. Try to organize your true feelings, so that they will gain an objective existence in the world. Find theories consistent with your practice. Create a criticism of art from your point of view. Create an image of the world, man, and culture which will be in harmony with you.”⁵⁷ It is precisely their greater distance from form that “could ensure us an altogether original contribution to European culture.”⁵⁸ A distance from Europe means a distance from the national form as well because the latter is so thoroughly determined by the European form. This is why the false choice confronting Polish writers—to be either a devotedly Polish or an aspiring European writer—maintains one within a subordinate position: both options take place within the formal parameters dictated by Europe itself. Instead of the incessant clamoring by Polish intellectuals to assert their worth, Gombrowicz “would listen to a Polish voice in Europe with great pleasure, saying to the intellect: enough, I don’t understand you, I can’t, I don’t want to.”⁵⁹

Eastern Europe is the exemplary but not the only site from which the potentiality of incomplete form becomes visible. Although phrases like “open to every wind” refer to the specific historical and political location between Germany and Russia (that is, between West and East and, in the earlier twentieth century, also between two opposing totalitarian forms), Gombrowicz’s account of formal incompleteness applies to Argentina as well, which he thought to share in the same cultural-formal predicament.⁶⁰ Argentinean intellectuals, on their part, saw a reflection of their own situation even in those of Gombrowicz’s writings that focus solely on Poland. As Ernesto Sábato wrote in the preface to the 1964 Spanish edition of *Ferdydurke*, “Gombrowicz tells his compatriots . . . that they shouldn’t try to rival the West and its forms but should instead try to become conscious of the power of their own and unfinished form, their own and unfinished immaturity. . . . A good lesson for us.”⁶¹ Ricardo Piglia, in turn, has famously called Gombrowicz “el mejor escritor argentino del siglo XX”—“the best Argentine writer of the twentieth century.”⁶² Because secondary European cultures include places as diverse as Canada, Romania, and Argentina, the formal designation marks a definitive break with geography and displaces it. Europe and, more specifically, Paris are no longer the corresponding geographical centers toward which marginal cultures aspire but rather cultures in which the adoption of respective national forms is seamless and identification with them is so complete that they are not even recognized as forms and appear, instead, fully authentic. The spatial distance between center and periphery becomes a formal difference.

Even as Gombrowicz is concerned with the cultural-national forms that make collective sentiment and behavior predictable, however, he puts consistent emphasis on the individual voice, both as something always threatened to be engulfed by the collective and as a vantage point of critique. But his theory of form and his insistence on the primacy of the individual over cultural monuments and abstractions belong also in the context of his own struggle for recognition. “Who can tell,” the narrator muses in *Ferdydurke*, “how much real beauty there is in this Beauty, and how much of it is a sociohistorical process?”⁶³ The question of the readability of literature, in distinction from admiration and interpretation, and intimately linked to the problem of socio-aesthetic Form, is so urgent for him because it has implications for the readability of his own work—and thus for the possibility of attaining the fullest existence possible.

A scene in his 1953 novel *Trans-Atlantyk*, set in a genteel literary salon in Buenos Aires, dramatizes this problem. In this scene, a young writer, touted by his compatriots as the Great Polish Genius, meets Argentina’s

Most Famous Author. Things begin to turn ugly when the old Master deigns to comment on something the young foreigner says: “The thought is interesting indeed,” he condescends. “Pity, not quite new for Sartorius already said it in his *Bucolics*.” Overhearing this, the Great Polish Genius feigns indifference: “What the devil do I need to know what Sartorius said if I Say?!” But the Argentinean Master is relentless: “Here they say: What do I care for Sartorius if I Say. And this is not a bad Thought . . . but the trouble is that Madame de Lespinasse said something like it in one of her *Letters*.”⁶⁴ On the brink of another duel, voices are hushed, neckties are loosened, and the young writer is reduced to a maniacal pacing around. “I was left with no words for I had lost my tongue!” he fumes. “And the scoundrel, he had made me mute so that I had no Words as what is mine is not Mine, apparently Stolen!”⁶⁵

The scene stages the predicament of all writers designated as minor, peripheral, or provincial: the problem of finding a language that would not be defined as derivative from the outset. The obscure foreigner has no words because all words, all ideas have already been claimed. The exclamation “I had lost my tongue!” presents the problem of finding his tongue again, of speaking and writing in spite of being disregarded. The confrontation with the Argentinean Master shows that cultural hierarchies underlying the system of literary value itself—a system that establishes originality and relevance as the primary criteria of legibility—define a priori both the limits of what can be said and the very form of address. The problem is, then, one of becoming read and readable as something other than a peripheral or provincial writer.

In *Trans-Atlantyk* the protagonist—a young writer adrift in a new country—depends on prominent Polish émigrés, who in turn use him to raise their nation in the eyes of local elites. Having taken him to the Buenos Aires salon to show off his (and therefore Poland’s) genius, it is they who goad him on to provoke the Argentinean Master to a duel—or, more properly, to a dogfight. It doesn’t help that “Gombrowicz” the protagonist tells them, “I am not a dog.” But they insist that he *bite* the old Master, for “it cannot be that they Celebrate him when the Great Polish Author, Genius is in the room! Bite him, you chitsh.t, you genius, bite him for if not, we will bite you!”⁶⁶ Thus backed into a corner, the young writer delivers his first blow, by proclaiming aloud and with full confidence: “I don’t like Butter too Buttery, Noodles too Noodly, . . . and Barley too Barley!”⁶⁷ It is this comment—nonchalant and, of course, nonsensical, though its content is, precisely, beside the point—that will lead the old Master to deny its author any originality. But not before something crucial occurs.

The Master must find out exactly what kind of foreigner this foreigner is: “[He] quietly accosted his Neighbour: ‘Who might that be?’ Says the neighbour: ‘A Foreign Author.’ Whereupon he became a bit discountenanced and asked whether English, French, or perchance Dutch; but the Neighbour says to him: ‘A Pole.’ ‘A Pole!’ he exclaimed, ‘A Pole!’ . . . and thereupon, having adjusted his Hat, mightily grimaced with his leg.”⁶⁸ Only then—having learned the young intruder’s origin—does the Argentinean Master allow himself to dismiss him. What he holds over the Polish Genius is not actual literary superiority but the degree of recognition he has been accorded. The Master does not represent Europe directly but, instead, holds only a tenuous claim to it based on the ability to invoke its authority. It is a duel in which one provincial author, still naive enough to demand to be taken on his own terms, is pitted against another, a mere ventriloquist of the dubious authority of a Europe represented through the likes of Sartorius and Madame Lespinasse. The system of literary value itself dictates the terms of their confrontation, in which—as in any duel that forces Form to extreme—the respective forms of the original and the derivative author, of the renowned and the obscure author, constitute an insurmountable barrier.

How then does an author *become* original if everything he says is a priori taken to be derivative? How does he come to be heard if no one pays attention unless he is *declared* to be worthy of attention? “Quit preening your turkey pride by blustering that this thought is well known, that that one has already been expressed,” Gombrowicz rebukes, in the *Diary*, commentators who noted parallels in his work with major contemporary movements such as structuralism or existentialism. “I signed no contract to serve up first-time ideas. In me, certain ideas that are in the air we all breathe are joined in a special and uniquely Gombrowiczian sense and I am this sense.”⁶⁹ Gombrowicz’s own struggle for recognition is not centered on attaining fame or on *being declared* a great writer—even if he knows it to be, to a degree, necessary. Like the naive Genius in *Trans-Atlantyck*, he wants to be read without resort to preestablished frames of intelligibility. Defining his own criteria of success, Gombrowicz insists on both his individuality and his independence: “For me, literature is not a matter of a career and future monuments but the excavating from myself of the maximum value of which I am capable. If it were to turn out that that which I write is inconsequential, then I am defeated not only as a writer but as a man. . . . Neither art nor the homeland means very much in and of itself. They mean very much, however, when a man binds himself, through them, to the real and profoundest values of being.”⁷⁰ Neither

literature nor the nation takes precedence over the single human being's right to assert himself against abstractions and monuments.

What implications might this have for recent revaluations and expansions of the putatively post-Eurocentric literary field? Gombrowiczian Form, the procedure of mere reading, and *niedo* as a standpoint of critique call attention to the difference between intelligibility and legibility. While intelligibility is aligned with determined concepts within stable systems of value, legibility is oriented toward different ethical and epistemological stakes. It is instructive to examine here a few of the most influential world-literary terms developed in the last few decades—the world republic of letters, national allegory, and distant reading—even if they have already received much commentary. Looking at these terms in some detail below is not meant to focus on the three critics whose proper names have come to stand for them. Rather than individual theorists' highly lauded and flawed efforts, they are elaborations of a limit, of a certain horizon of expectation. Oriented toward masterful apprehension, moreover, their habits of reading reflect their location securely within the metropole. It is worth examining them in this context because, in light of Gombrowicz's thinking, they will be seen to belong to the very Eurocentric frame they aspire to sidestep or dismantle.

The scene in the Buenos Aires salon from *Trans-Atlantyk* illustrates the first of these almost to a fault, as it perfectly captures the dynamics of the struggle for access to literary capital. In Pascale Casanova's terms, the world republic of letters—an idea informed by world-systems theory and Fernand Braudel's *longue durée*—is a space where the literarily “deprived” nations vie for recognition to join the literarily “endowed” nations, which alone are the originators and producers of literary value.⁷¹ Paris, the most endowed of the capitals, serves as the ultimate arbiter, while literary value is not inherent in the works but something around which consensus by the right people in the proper conditions must be built. Only when a work is thus “consecrated” and value is accorded to its author can literary capital be accumulated by his or her nation. The young Polish Genius's position is precisely that of literary dependency and—like all “deprived” writers in his situation—he has three possible modes of “revolt.” The weakest mode, according to Casanova, is assimilation, which means choosing to repudiate one's own marginal nation altogether and “by almost clandestine means to appropriate the literary heritage of the centers.”⁷² Rebellion, in turn—the outright refusal to imitate the center—entails the effort to exploit one's national difference as a form of cultural capital instead. The revolutionists, finally, “break away from the national and nationalist

model of literature and, in inventing the conditions of their autonomy, achieve freedom.”⁷³

If the Polish Genius in *Trans-Atlantyk* gets only so far as to realize his predicament and has no time to revolt in any mode, its author has considered all three paths. Assimilation and rebellion are precisely the two positions Gombrowicz himself understands to be readily available to Polish writers but rejects because both condemn one to being “cheaply provincial” and “second-rate.” The one he chooses for himself most closely resembles that of Casanova’s revolutionists—but with a difference. For Casanova, the only conceivable end of achieving freedom is to be “consecrated” by the center. Gombrowicz, in contrast, seeks absolute freedom, which requires complete autonomy from the center itself.⁷⁴ It is not simply, then, that Gombrowicz attacks the establishment of literary value through his innovations and, in the effort to avoid being consigned to invisibility, strives to match the achievements of the Western canon. Well aware of the constraints of such consecration, Gombrowicz mocks, for instance, the efforts to promote Jorge Luis Borges in the international prize circuit. “One more fortifying the national soccer team in the great international match” he scoffs when the elderly, blind writer embarks on a publicity trip to Europe in 1962 in the hopes of being awarded the Nobel Prize. “Oh, that he not feel more like the ball than the goalie!”⁷⁵ Such consecration in the world republic of letters is not a means of achieving full autonomy but an obstacle to legibility. Gombrowicz thus works against what Casanova takes to be a central tenet of the world republic of letters: that the efforts of “impoverished” writers are subordinate to their nations’ need to accumulate literary capital. In response to a critic who called him “the pride of the Polish nation,” Gombrowicz reminds himself of the imperative “to not allow oneself to be pulled into the nation.’ My literature must remain that which it is. Especially that something which does not fit into politics and does not want to serve it. I cultivate just one politics: my own. I am a separate state.”⁷⁶

The unquestioned assumption that all “deprived” writers accept the authority of the center and that the three tactics of revolt are all aimed at traversing the distance between the peripheral nation and the literary center finds resistance in Gombrowiczian Form. Awareness of its operation makes it impossible to locate such a center, or indeed to imagine recognition in terms of spatial proximity. “Europe,” “the West,” and “Paris” are not places or locations—however metaphorical—to reach; they are forms always already embedded *within* the peripheral nation’s self-definition, within such a nation’s own system of cultural value, present at every turn and informing

every utterance.⁷⁷ How to free oneself from it (*not* how to fall more directly into its embrace) is one of Gombrowicz's chief preoccupations. The system of literary value, with the "subject supposed to admire" at its foundation, reserves the central position for the Western European canon and silences its "others"—whether it refuses *or* grants them recognition—so that not just the first but all three tactics of "revolt" lead to assimilation.⁷⁸ For Casanova, in contrast, the system of literary value itself is not in question. She is merely concerned with its more equitable distribution. Despite her insistence on describing the world-literary space in terms that paint the literary establishment in imperialist colors—*violence, domination, appropriation, and deprivation*—she falls short of indicting the system of value itself.⁷⁹

Such conflation of literature with the literary value establishment and thus with the system of intelligibility this establishment depends on extends beyond Casanova's particular intervention. Fredric Jameson's early influential thesis that "all third-world texts are necessarily . . . allegorical" works within similar epistemic parameters.⁸⁰ As he writes in the well-known 1986 essay "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," "Third-world texts necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society."⁸¹ The idea of national allegory, however, should not be understood as describing an intrinsic characteristic of Third World literatures—even if this is what Jameson's proposal has been taken to mean. It is, instead, a way of making such literatures intelligible in the first place—the necessary basis for rehabilitating them from invisibility and from the charge of inadequacy they otherwise could not escape. As Jameson writes in the beginning of the essay:

Many arguments can be made for the importance and interest of non-canonical forms of literature such as that of the third world, but one is peculiarly self-defeating because it borrows the weapons of the adversary: the strategy of trying to prove that these texts are as "great" as those of the canon itself. . . . Nothing is to be gained by passing over in silence *the radical difference* of non-canonical texts. The third-world novel will not offer the satisfactions of Proust or Joyce; [it tends] to remind us of outmoded stages of our own first-world cultural development.⁸²

The founding critical gesture of the essay is to take on directly what most have been "passing over in silence": the apparently indisputable fact

that “the third-world novel will not offer the satisfactions of Proust or Joyce.” The idea of national allegory thus enables the First World critic to acknowledge without discomfort this “radical difference,” which is really radical inferiority and belatedness. It makes this difference openly speakable by attributing it to Third World texts as their intrinsic quality (rather than recognizing it as an effect of a relation of domination) and detaches Third World literatures from the literary value establishment altogether by giving them their own separate standard (rather than examining that very relation). Jameson recognizes that extending the system of value to the previously undervalued does not work (“weapons of the adversary”), but he does not go so far as to implicate the valued or to target that system itself. “National allegory,” inadvertently or not, keeps intact the Eurocentric forms of self and other.

The problem of a Eurocentric system of aesthetic value, then, remains unresolved here and dictates the terms on which its “others” become admissible. Reading a work of literature as a national allegory is not reading at all but relies instead on a determination assigned in advance, which mediates the relation between the text and its reader. If instead, in light of Gombrowicz’s Kantian notion of Form, we think of the work of art as staging the minimum conditions of cognizability—as revealing and maintaining the threshold between cognition and its impossibility—then national allegory leaves no space for the barely cognizable. National allegory resolves in advance “the radical difference of non-canonical texts”—which for Jameson is simply their aesthetic inferiority but which for Gombrowicz would introduce radical uncertainty into the reader’s relation to the text.

Contrary to either its stated intention or its reception, then, “national allegory” is not a new way of looking at the previously overlooked but only a description, and even legitimation, of the status quo. Indeed, it partakes of a long-standing epistemological gesture embedded in comparative study more broadly. As James Clifford has argued with reference to anthropology, all “ethnographic texts are inescapably allegorical” in their effort to make meaningful that which often resists cognition and that which would otherwise be a scandal to reason. A !Kung woman’s particular experience, for example, must simultaneously be marked as an irreducibly *human* experience as well in order to become intelligible. Through allegory, writes Clifford, “a difference is posited and transcended” at the same time so that we register this difference but do not have to confront it.⁸³ Just as in Jameson’s “national allegory” the intervening frame of the nation (and the larger frame of the “Third World”) absolves the reader of the obligation to confront the text directly, so in “ethnographic allegory” the frame of

universal human experience works to assimilate the “other” into ordinary understanding while simultaneously keeping it at a distance, in a category apart. Reading Third World literatures—and cultures—allegorically thus both precedes and outlasts Jameson’s proposal. It consolidates a chief problem of the field more than it presents an intervention.

Reading as such, then, proves elusive both in Casanova’s world republic of letters, where it is subordinated to and then resolved by the institutional system of literary value, and in Jameson’s notion of national allegory, where it is replaced by determined concepts of nation and region. But the outlines of the problem come into sharpest focus when Gombrowicz’s designation of “unreadable and unread books”—prompted by Kafka’s work but extended to all literature—is juxtaposed with an apparently similar notion: “the great unread,” a phrase Margaret Cohen uses in passing and Franco Moretti picks up in the course of articulating his well-known idea of “distant reading.”⁸⁴ At least on the surface, “the great unread” is also concerned with books that go unread and forgotten, and it is precisely distant reading that offers a means of restoring them into existence. And, like Gombrowicz’s quip, the idea of distant reading also comes, in a certain sense, out of a refusal to admire because only in sidestepping admiration can some aspects of literature become open to scrutiny. But, as it will become apparent, distant reading departs from reading altogether and—coincidence or not—it departs as well from any overtly political or ethical commitment.⁸⁵

The idea of “the great unread” is meant to remind us that, out of the total literary production of a given historical moment, only a select few works find themselves in the canon, while the remaining majority—99.5 percent to be exact, according to Moretti—fall into oblivion. Focusing on this unread majority marks an effort to disenchant the study of literature by shifting away from a select few masterpieces toward an expanded vision of long-term trends that do not fit into national boundaries, standard literary histories, or narrow notions of aesthetic merit. By the same token, according to Moretti, the notion of “the great unread” is also meant to disabuse literary critics of their delusions of influence: it is neither their willed disregard of works based on their authors’ minority status nor their deliberate efforts to establish such works’ value that dictates the canon but the market itself. The blind operation of the market thus bypasses the processes of literary-value production and canon formation that have been the targets of feminist, ethnic studies, and postcolonial critiques, so that, instead of relying on identity categories and historical conditions to explain why some works are less valued than others, “the great unread” depends on the apparently more neutral market as a far more objective,

because anonymous, mechanism of selection. In a remarkable emptying out of the political and ethical imperatives that prompted the recent rethinking of comparative literature in the first place, Moretti privileges an enlarged scope for its own sake and borrows freely from the world-systems perspective without, at the same time, importing its Marxist priorities.

Not inclusiveness based on politically significant identity categories, then, but sheer scope becomes the measure of success in accounting for “the great unread.” As Moretti writes, the hope underlying this sober economic approach is “to come up with a new sense of the literary field as a whole” and to produce a new kind of knowledge about literature. But he concedes: “Of course, there is a problem here. Knowing two hundred novels is already difficult. Twenty thousand? How can we do it, what does ‘knowledge’ mean, in this new scenario? One thing for sure: it cannot mean the very close reading of very few texts—secularized theology, really (‘canon’!)—that has radiated from the cheerful town of New Haven over the whole field of literary studies. A larger literary history requires other skills: sampling; statistics; work with series, titles, concordances, incipits.”⁸⁶ Yet if Moretti admits that knowing even two hundred novels is difficult, it is not, in principle, in any way problematic. “Knowing” (implicitly, ambivalently equated with “reading”) becomes impossible only as a practical matter, when the sheer number of texts thus excavated overwhelms the would-be reader.

Paradoxically, then, “the great unread” will remain unread. The alternative to oblivion is not full existence or equitable appreciation but mapping and classification. Even as this procedure usefully dismisses admiration (by recognizing it as an inauthentic—or at least unilluminating—relation to literature), it may be said to represent another instance of interpassivity: the mere fact of numerous works being recorded and accounted for *somewhere* is unabashedly embraced as a way of being done with them. To recall Žižek, we might say that it is the archive that knows—perhaps, even, it is the archive that *has read*—for us, so that we do not have to. Instead of engagement, attending to “the great unread” through distant reading entails reconstructing the totality of an object called literature—an always potentially recuperable object (and, in principle, an eminently *readable* object even if it proves less so in practice), although one that is, paradoxically, less and less accessible the more complete it becomes. Such attention to large-scale trends and to the operations of the market may produce a new knowledge, but it leaves unanswered—indeed, it explicitly excludes—the problem of reading itself. It delegates the obligation to read to the archive.⁸⁷

This is where the difference between Moretti's solution to "the great unread" and Gombrowicz's concern with "unreadable and unread masterpieces" becomes most apparent. Distant reading presumes that we want to read and that we know what this entails; it presumes, as well, that the privileged few works of the canon have already *been* read. Gombrowicz's remark on Kafka as an unreadable master, in contrast, keeps readability itself anxiously in question. The various frames of intelligibility accorded to particular works—the canonical and the noncanonical, the central and the marginal, the First World and the Third or Second World—do not manifest themselves, respectively, in either facilitating or obstructing reading. Rather, all works—whether universally admired or consigned to oblivion—keep open the question of readability as a problem constitutive both of literature and of cross-cultural relations.

POSTSCRIPT: UNREADING A MASTERPIECE

What happens when a writer from the margin raises the question of reading directly? What reading strategies are available, viable, or productive from such a position? The pages of Gombrowicz's *Diary* are filled with opinions, analyses, and polemics concerning other writers' literary and philosophical works. They are filled as well with explications and defenses of his own novels and plays. But there is only one scene of reading as such—in a 1966 fragment of the *Diary*, also published in a bilingual Polish-French volume entitled *Sur Dante*, where Gombrowicz undertakes to read *The Divine Comedy*. It shows what can happen to reading when one no longer reads from within the presumed core.

This fragment of the *Diary* is not *a* reading, exactly—not a consistent interpretation, faithful to the whole of Dante's text, carried out with full attention. It is, on the contrary, capricious, mercurial, constantly interrupted, extended in time, and deeply personal—as if this older Gombrowicz, with thoughts of death now more frequently on his mind, were enacting his own youthful reflections from *Ferdynand* on the impossibility of grasping the whole of a work: "Doesn't the reader assimilate parts only, and only partly at that?" he asked in the novel. "He reads a part . . . then stops, only to resume reading another piece later. . . . Quite often he'll read a couple of segments then toss the book aside, not because he has lost interest in it, but because something else came to mind."⁸⁸ Taking this inescapable partiality of reading for

granted, *Sur Dante* is an effortful attempt to establish a direct relation to the text nonetheless—an attempt in which finding this relation takes precedence over establishing the text’s meaning.

The scene of reading begins lightheartedly enough, with Gombrowicz the twentieth-century writer looking down on the medieval author’s clumsy constructions. “*Through me the way to a doleful land . . .*” he begins, only to pause: “‘Doleful land’? About hell? Couldn’t he have come up with something better? . . . I can express it better today!”⁸⁹ He rewrites a few lines from *Inferno* to show his superior knowledge and skill. “An interesting thought,” he congratulates himself when he is done. “A modern thought. A thought a trifle too dialectical, but it does expand the imagination.”⁹⁰ He goes on to reflect on the effort of making present to oneself something already past, of treating the past as if it were present and capable of speaking to him directly. “I immerse myself in time that has been disposed of to reach him, this dead, this somehow ‘former’ Alighieri.”⁹¹ This need to have the past be “complete, alive, filled with people” leads Gombrowicz to ask what it is about the human sciences of his own century that he finds so alienating and distasteful, and finds it: “They want to get out of themselves, leave themselves. The object. Objectivity. . . . That ‘purity’ which draws them in the direction of dehumanization.”⁹² From this point on, he will seek to find, underneath the rubble of time and underneath the masterpiece, Dante as a human being capable of pain, acquainted with pain as the only guarantor of humanity—Dante not as an achievement or a Great but as Dante himself.

But that, too, is difficult. If we are taught to revere the Great, Gombrowicz writes, “In real life our attitude is ambivalent: I humble myself and marvel at these works, but I also regard them with condescension and disdain. I am inferior because they are Great, but I am superior because I am later.” And yet, if reverence gives no access to the man himself, the opposite approach is equally futile because it destroys the work: “When I try to get at him brutally, directly, bypassing time, that *Divine Comedy* of his doesn’t amount to a hill of beans!”⁹³

Until, that is, Gombrowicz stumbles on the next tercet: “Here suddenly . . . a jolt! What?! How could he?!”⁹⁴—the reader exclaims, making *his* reader suddenly awaken in her turn, wondering, “What?! What is it?! What did you see there?” The placid, outdated, harmless Dante suddenly becomes monstrous because, for a moment, Gombrowicz takes him at his word. What does it mean, he asks, for Dante to write that hell was made by “Supreme Wisdom and Supreme Love”? Hell is not a

punishment, Gombrowicz objects, because it does not purify or redeem. It therefore does not accord with our sense of justice; it is a scandal to call hell a product of *love*. “No other word in the human language has been applied in such a shamelessly perverse manner,” he writes. “This disgraceful book falls out of our hands, and our wounded lips whisper: he had no right . . .” It is a double scandal: not just that “Dante accepts hell, he agrees to it,” but that “a work so depraved by the wildest fear and so servile . . . transformed itself in the course of centuries into a Book of Edification, into the most eminent of poems.”⁹⁵

And so, for a moment, Gombrowicz has found Dante: “I’ve gotten hold of him, *he offends me, infuriates me, so there he is . . .* behind that wall of time. . . . He has become a living person to me through the highest Pain. Satisfaction. I jot down: yes, Pain makes real.”⁹⁶ But then, listening again, listening more closely, he realizes “that it is not *he* that is singing [through his verses]. It is the entire Middle Ages.” Dante is lost again, this time to his Epoch, which speaks through him, which gives him preformed ideas. All he has to do is mouth them, speak the language given to him. Once again, *The Divine Comedy* “becomes a mere monument, form, codification, ritual, gesture, rite, ceremony.”⁹⁷

But nothing remains in place in this reading. The passage moves through several more turns; “Wait a minute!” Gombrowicz writes, only to put forth a “but . . .” Dante slips out of grasp, and the reading culminates in profound instability. “And what are you, therefore, O *Divine Comedy*?” he asks at the end. “The clumsy work of a minor Dante? Or the mighty work of a great Dante? The monstrous work of a wicked Dante? Or the rhetorical recitation of a deceitful Dante? The empty ritual of Dante’s epoch? An artificial fire? A real fire? Unreality? . . . Tell me, O pilgrim, how am I to reach you?”⁹⁸

Gombrowicz’s reading against the dehumanizing abstractions of Epoch, Tradition, and Masterpiece—a reading that dislocates Dante without granting him an alternate foothold—is one carried out from his own position of dislocation. It is an unstable reading conducted from the uncertain standpoint of *niedo*, of an incompleteness characteristic of secondary cultures. As Gombrowicz tells Dominique de Roux in his interview around the same time, an Eastern European finds himself in an impossible position in relation to the monuments of European culture: “For a painter or a writer from the countries of degraded Form, from the frontier zones of Europe, the journey to Paris, Rome, or London adopted the proportions of an important problem. How was he to behave? How should he adapt himself? Calm respect

and discretion? Cold politeness? Admiration? Humility? The shameless irony of the demi-barbarian? Familiarity? Premeditated simplicity? All those tactics only have one fault: they betray . . . the reality . . . of the poor relations.”⁹⁹ As he takes up several of these tactics in his changeful, irreverent reading of Dante—most of all, the refusal to admire, which puts him at risk of falling into the determined form of “the poor relations” all the more but which is also impossible *not* to attempt—Gombrowicz elaborates, indirectly, the tenuous potential of *niedo* to unsettle the fixed form of Europe.

Gombrowicz’s reading of Dante, without interpretation *or* admiration, will not serve as a model, once and for all, for what reading should be. Indeed, it may even warn us not to attempt reading at all. This kind of reading certainly works against the disciplinary need for stable objects—or, in Haun Saussy’s words—the disciplinary need for “successful reification.”¹⁰⁰ Its value lies, instead, in foregrounding the conditions of legibility that concern both canonical and noncanonical works, and the difficulty of reading that afflicts all literature. Instead of deciding with any accuracy just what kind of object Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is, and instead of assuming a correspondingly stable readerly position, Gombrowicz is consumed with establishing a new relation—a relation in which his own coherence is implicated and undermined. In this reading, an ethic of not-knowing—a kind of strained openness to the text—eschews the need for stable objects, at the same time as it demands the refusal of stable frames of intelligibility. As Gombrowicz’s reading deforms that which is supposed to have been already read, already determined, it also makes space for reworking the very bases on which the still-barely-cognizable—the unacclaimed and the indeterminate—might attain the right to the fullest existence possible.

Europe after Eurocentrism

Translating Tischner's Góral Philosophy

What does a literary work “say”? What does it communicate? It “tells” very little to those who understand it.

WALTER BENJAMIN, “The Task of the Translator”

Through all the talk of God across the ages, there can be heard the sound of words, snapped apart and put together again.

JÓZEF TISCHNER, *Spór o istnienie człowieka*
(Controversy over the existence of man)

Europe *after* Eurocentrism? This Europe exists only in the mode of “as if” and is for now realized in the future-anterior temporality of the will-have-been. It is not a Europe “provincialized” from without but one reimagined from within.

The contours of this Europe after Eurocentrism will emerge in this chapter from the setting side by side of two works that appeared at about the same time but in opposite parts of the continent. The first is *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (2004), edited by French philologist Barbara Cassin and followed by its much-celebrated English translation as *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*.¹ Published after more than a decade of collaboration by over 150 contributors, *Vocabulaire* is poised exactly between the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, which formally established the European Union, and the first Eastern enlargement of 2004, which added ten new members to the union. The project thus links together philosophy, language, and the question of Europe at the precise moment of Europe's accelerated institutional integration from within *and* the impending redefinition of its borders from without.

The second of these works, *Historia filozofii po góralsku* (History of philosophy in Góral; 1996), is a little book written in the Góral

dialect of Polish by Catholic theologian Józef Tischner. Written in the same historical moment as *Vocabulaire*, Tischner's *Historia filozofii po góralsku* mentions nothing of Europe—even as it intends a thoroughgoing, if playful, retelling of the origin stories that underpin Western metaphysics. It begins with the unabashed claim “In the beginning, there were Górala everywhere.”² And it was Górala—not Greeks—who were the first philosophers. This indigenous group of Tatra mountain highlanders, speaking a distinctive dialect and living in the Podhale region of Poland as well as in northern Slovakia and Czech, is thus placed at the origins of philosophy.³ Coming from an otherwise serious Polish theologian and public intellectual whose work spans Levinasian ethics and rural activism, this claim stands the history of Western metaphysics on its head. By a sleight of hand proper to literature, *Historia* toys with philosophy and turns it into fiction—a kind of knowledge inviting reinvention, rather than mere transmission, of tradition.

Both focused on language and its obstructions, *Vocabulaire* and *Historia* invite us to consider translation and translatability as alternative terms for thinking about the place of philosophy in a new Europe. They also challenge us to consider the role of language and, less obviously, of reading in the ongoing rearrangement of European identity that takes place through the three simultaneous yet divergent movements: of unification (as a kind of centering), enlargement (as a decentering), and accession (as a working toward the center). How does the work of language—through translation and reading—hinder, deflect, or hasten those movements? What happens when we think of the European project in terms of translation? This chapter will attend to the ways in which each work mobilizes translation in the service of redefining European identity in anticipation of a postnational future—the ways each thinks of its own positioning with respect to that future, and the ways each reimagines the past from its own vantage point. At the same time, the technocratic project of the European Union, with its own language policies and its own investments in translation, must give them both pause, as it appropriates and translates in *its* turn the philosophical-humanistic idioms they hold in common.

For all their affinities, however, the two works will raise these questions in different ways. It is crucial that, even as *Vocabulaire* and *Historia* may be said to appear at the same historical moment—under the shadow (or uncertain promise) of European unification—they arise from radically different historical *situations*: those of the West and of the East of Europe, after the dislocations effected in each by the

fall of the Berlin Wall. Only the first is located firmly within Europe, accorded a full claim to “Europe” as a proper name and a philosophical idea, while the second appears confined to an insular cultural location and remains untranslated into English—hindered, no doubt, by the difficulties its translation would pose.⁴

Their discrepant vantage points help rearticulate the divide within Europe in the new terms of translation and translatability. It is because *Vocabulaire* and *Historia* are not in direct conversation with each other that they call attention—precisely through their focus on translation—to the possibility of Europe as a community of equals. When Eastern Europe’s entry into Europe takes place, as it does, under the sign of belatedness (political and economic as well as cultural), its equality with Western Europe is forever deferred, held out as an eventual outcome of a process. In this process, Eastern Europe has been positioned, at once, as object and addressee of explication—always requiring explanation and introduction on the one hand, and placed on the receiving end of instruction on the other hand. What would a new Europe look like if Eastern Europe were, instead, already *presumed to be equal*—presumed to be European? What if Eastern Europe were positioned as subject to—and of—translation?

TRANSLATION AND EQUALITY

The terms of *translation* and *translatability* enable a different way of looking at European enlargement and Eastern European accession—by placing in full view the underlying problem of an equal claim to “European” knowledge or to “Europe” as a philosophical inheritance. The two works, read together, will also test the emergent scholarly consensus that the rubric of translation might offer respite from the ethical and political problems that haunt humanistic inquiry in its transnational and post-Eurocentric incarnations. Because it deals directly with language, before any national or political frame of intelligibility might precondition reading, translation promises access to what is inevitably obscured by such extrinsic categories and seems to guarantee an immediate confrontation with “otherness.” Emily Apter, thus, has argued that “translation is a significant medium of subject re-formation and political change” because it “forces an encounter with intractable alterity, with that which will not be subject to translation.”⁵ If the impressive array of recent critical paradigms—including postnationalism, world

literature, cosmopolitanism, planetarity, globalism, diaspora, the global South, or parastates—has failed to “answer fully the challenge of making comparative literature geopolitically case-sensitive and site-specific in ways that avoid reproducing neoimperialist cartographies,” Apter writes, then “contemporary translation studies answers comparative literature’s longstanding commitment to investigating zones of cultural and literary expression that go unnamed or that are walled off into untranslatability.”⁶ With a similar faith in the redemptive potential of translation, Sandra Bermann has written that “the ‘exorbitant’ quality of language, that which remains mysteriously ‘other’ within it, is never more salient—or perturbing—than in the culturally other-directed work of translation. It also suggests that the translator’s task is inevitably an ethical one.”⁷

While the rubric of translation may indeed help reconceptualize the expanding literary (and, more broadly, cultural) field through a radically different lens, it also calls for caution. First, as Rey Chow has put it, “languages and cultures almost never enter the world stage and encounter one another on an equal footing.”⁸ Second, the fact that translation depends on the hierarchy between an original and a copy has, through an all-too-seamless move from *textual* to *cultural* translation, been one of the chief epistemic supports of Eurocentrism. As post-colonial critics have pointed out, “Europe was regarded as the great Original, the starting point, and the colonies were therefore copies, or ‘translations’ of Europe,” secondary and imperfect.⁹ Any enthusiasm about translation, then—even if it does not forget that it has so easily lent itself to legitimating cultural hierarchies in the past—must be constantly supplemented with the effort to interrogate this tendency in the present. And third, the privilege of careful translation has long been accorded to dominant traditions deemed complex enough to be worthy of close attention, while, in the case of the dominated or the marginalized, translation has served to produce transparent knowledge and to facilitate transparent communication. Finally, at a historical moment when the “transnational” or the “postnational” appeals equally to humanists, corporations, and technocrats, and when “translation” suggests itself as the instrument of both humanistic progress and the smooth operation of the market, this potential for unwitting collusion must curb any unquestioned commitment to these terms. Critics such as Apter and Bermann are no doubt aware of these historical legacies and political pitfalls. On the most general level, however, translation merits caution because, on its own, it cannot defend itself from the easy

slippage between these interests; there is nothing intrinsic to translation that would guarantee a specific politics. As the term *translation* shifts between the psychic, cultural, and linguistic registers and is called on to effect multiple—and politically radical—transformations, its potentially redeeming, “perturbing” quality is too vulnerable to warrant unguarded faith. Because translation alone cannot reliably ward off old or new inequalities, whether epistemic or political, inequality itself must be closely attended to.

Only when the problem of equality is put clearly in the foreground might translation reliably serve the ethical imperatives of what is sometimes called the new humanities—the project of envisioning new collectivities after Eurocentrism. For translation exhibits a peculiar ambivalence: even as it depends on a built-in hierarchy between the original and the copy, there is little to stop the copy from acting *as if* it were an original. In Tischner’s irreverent retelling of the origin story of European philosophy, staged *as if* it were an inheritance that belongs to Góral, the presumption of equality is inseparable from the mode of translation in which, as I will suggest, *Historia* demands to be read.

Tischner is not alone in forging this link between translation and equality. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Jacques Rancière offers a more explicit theory of translation that lends force to the mode of *as if*—where acting as if something were *already* accomplished is, precisely, the way to make it come about. (The mode of *as if* is, thus, also akin to the temporality of the *will have been*, the future anterior tense in which—as Gayatri Spivak poignantly argues—any reimagination of the present must take place.¹⁰)

The Ignorant Schoolmaster tells the story of Joseph Jacotot, a French pedagogue granted political asylum and a teaching post in Louvain in the early 1800s.¹¹ Put in the situation of teaching students with whom he did not share a language, Jacotot accidentally invented a new method: in order to teach them French, he relied *not* on explication and instruction—not on transmitting knowledge he was supposed to possess to students who did not yet possess it—but, instead, on reading and translation, on a direct encounter with a text or a body of knowledge without the mediation of a master’s intelligence. Jacotot simply presented his students with a book, a bilingual French-Flemish edition of Fénelon’s *Les aventures de Télémaque* and asked them to read it. When the method worked, it revealed two striking facts: that anyone can learn anything, simply by applying full attention; and that, since the master is no longer the one invested with knowledge but only with

the responsibility to ensure that the student pays attention, anyone can also teach anything. The method reminded Jacotot that everyone possesses an innate intelligence, regardless of status or achievement: just as every young child learns language without instruction, so an older person—without the need to be instructed by someone else—has the tools necessary to learn.

The crucial aspect of this insight is that, for the method to work, universal intelligence must be presumed as an accomplished fact: it is not that everyone has the potential to *become* intelligent but that everyone already *has* intelligence. It is already at work in everyday acts. But, as Jacotot comes to believe, this simple fact of already-existing equality of intelligence is hidden and denied by every institution of social progress, including the school, because it depends on instruction and explication, and thus on the traversal of a gap. Instead of furthering social equality, the pedagogical establishment perpetuates inequality because it takes the latter as the basis of its own system. This is because explication—which underlies not only intellectual-pedagogical institutions but also the social order at large—depends on a fundamental assumption of inequality between the intelligence of the master and that of the student. Explication thus only maintains the artificial distance between the two intelligences.

In contrast to this prevailing logic, Jacotot's experience reveals that "understanding is never more than translating . . . giving the equivalent of a text" and that there is "no false bottom that necessitates the work of an *other* intelligence, that of the explicator."¹² The student's intelligence is sufficient for the task. "There is nothing to understand," Jacotot often tells his students. "Everything is in the book."¹³ Emancipated from the explicative order through Jacotot's method of unmediated encounter with texts as a form of translation, students must use only their own intelligence, so that "all of their effort . . . is strained toward this: someone has addressed words to them that they want to recognize and respond to, not as students or as learned men, but as people . . . under the sign of equality."¹⁴ Translation at its most radical moments, therefore, enables the recognition of an a priori equality with respect to knowledge. If progressively minded explicators can only endeavor "to make an equal society out of unequal men, to *reduce* inequality indefinitely" through instruction, true emancipation depends on acting *as if* equality were already accomplished.¹⁵

In light of Jacotot's insights, it is the question of Europe as a community of equals that *Vocabulaire* and *Historia*, when read together,

implicitly raise through their focus on translation. But, at the same time as they emerge from different historical situations and exploit the openings of translation to distinct effect, they also call for distinct ways of reading. The ambition of *Vocabulaire* is that “the languages of Europe be taken into account, and not only from the patrimonial point of view in the way one preserves endangered species.”¹⁶ With its main text written in French, it contains some four hundred entries, from ABSTRACTION to WUNSCH, each including rough synonyms in some of fourteen other languages (most often Greek, Latin, English, German, and Italian, with occasional additional words from “a certain number of contemporary European languages”). It will be difficult to look at *Vocabulaire* without, at the same time, evaluating it: the project opens with a “Présentation” of its own rationale and theorizes itself, only to give us the thing itself in the form of the actual dictionary. As a theory immediately put into practice, it thus begs the question of its own success. Most importantly, however, as an encyclopedic project, *Vocabulaire* by definition does not invite direct reading—it is, in Jacotot’s terms, a staging of mastery and expertise, however unwitting, where knowledge appears as an object to which access must be mediated. At its best *Vocabulaire* is not a text *to be read* but a compilation of explications.

One book presents itself as all-inclusive, then, while the other appears sealed in its particularity. Compared to *Vocabulaire*—as comprehensive as humanly possible, representing so many major languages—Tischner’s book not only is written in a dialect of an Eastern European language but, to make things worse, is addressed directly *to* speakers of that dialect, a group of Tatra mountain highlanders in southern Poland.¹⁷ Written in the form of an intellectual history recounted by a storyteller to a circle of listeners, the book—prefaced by the outrageous claim that Góral, not Greek, were the first philosophers—appears to assure its own self-enclosure from the outset and seems only to repeat the familiar compensatory gesture of poor relations, who, unheeded, insist on their own importance in blatant disregard of the facts. These respective guises of universality and particularity pose the question of equality all the more urgently because they also underpin the appearance of inequality of reason between Western and Eastern Europe.

POST-BABELIAN EUROPE

In her introduction to *Vocabulaire*, Barbara Cassin notes that “one of the most urgent problems posed by Europe is that of languages.”¹⁸ But the aim of the project is not to streamline divergent notions or to find a standard for philosophers in a unifying Europe to follow—and thereby, once and for all, to abolish misunderstanding and misuse in the way an emerging EU institution might wish. On the contrary: the editorial team of *Vocabulaire* is emphatically *not* a philosophical equivalent of the market-centered European Committee for Standardization; there is no celebration of conformity in the manner of the Forum for Conformity Assessment. *Vocabulaire* promises instead a working notion of *untranslatability* to counterbalance the perfect exchangeability of a common currency and the threat of English—or any other lingua franca that may impose order on the confusion of tongues—as a linguistic equivalent of the euro. Cassin and her collaborators aim to keep in play the plurality of European languages by “making manifest in each instance the meaning and the weight of differences, the only way of truly facilitating communication between languages and between cultures.”¹⁹ Celebrated but not sacralized, the untranslatables of philosophy are the salutary “symptoms of difference” in a Europe threatened with technocratically imposed homogeneity. “The untranslatable is that which one does not cease (not) to translate”—that which demands and resists translation at the same time, as the uneasy passage between *mind*, *Geist*, and *esprit*, for example, makes manifest.²⁰ In its design, *Vocabulaire* is cognizant of the dangers attending such a project: it vows to recognize multiplicity not only among, but also within, languages; it takes care not to “confer a particular status to any one language, dead or living”; and it tries to steer clear of either “a logical universalism indifferent to languages” or “an ontological nationalism that essentializes the genius of [select] languages.”²¹

And yet, for all the caution taken, it founders. *Vocabulaire* is strangely dated the moment it appears, at once attuned and oblivious to the moment of its own production. The “urgency” of the problem of languages acknowledges only the changes attending integration within Western Europe, not the impending accession of Eastern states. Of the two simultaneous processes—unification and enlargement—one is cited as impetus for a rethinking of European philosophy in a way that might serve a postnational Europe, while the other is passed over in

silence. In purely practical terms, therefore, *Vocabulaire* cannot serve either as an accurate statement of European identity under revisal or, more modestly, even as a handbook that might facilitate intellectual exchange where it might be most needed: across the receding East-West divide.

The attempt to read *Vocabulaire* “for” Eastern Europe reveals—or confirms—only its absence.²² Beyond a few Russian terms and an entry on the Russian language, there is not even a nod to the Prague Linguistic Circle or the Tartu School in the entry on SEMIOTIQUE, for example; no indication of the importance of romanticism for, say, Polish national liberation struggles under ROMANTIQUE, where the term is admitted its English, French, and German variants; and, in the entry on LANGUES ET TRADITIONS CONSTITUTIVES DE LA PHILOSOPHIE EN EUROPE, we find mention only of Germanic and Romance—but not Slavic or any other Eastern European—languages among the modern inheritors of Greek, Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew traditions.²³ The effect is to underscore the unimaginability of Eastern Europe as either originator of or contributor to philosophy. Not even the mere borrowings or inevitable distortions in Eastern European languages appear in this project, interested as it is in mistranslation.²⁴

These omissions might be easily explained by historical contingencies: as a collaborative project, *Vocabulaire* testifies to the institutional and national limits within already-existing networks of intellectual exchange; Eastern Europe’s absence may be a mere reflection of fact. In the terms offered by *Vocabulaire* itself, however, this absence poses a conceptual problem. If the aim is to render manifest the work of the untranslatable within philosophy and within Europe, and if “each entry takes part in . . . a node of untranslatability and proceeds to a comparison of terminological webs,” then what is the status of that which is not subject to translation in the first place?²⁵ It lies outside the node of untranslatability that constitutes both “Europe” and “philosophy.” If the untranslatable is that which does not cease (not) to be translated, then the entirely absent must be something beyond the untranslatable still: that which does not even begin to be (mis)translated.

But *Vocabulaire* goes astray for another reason as well, this time due to the work of language itself, which undercuts the project’s self-conscious positioning “après Babel.” In *Mother Tongues*, Barbara Johnson remarks on the near impossibility of getting away entirely from the logic of original and copy, and from a notion of a pure, original, or perfectly referential language, both of which haunt our thinking about

translation. First, Johnson writes, “Only through translation does an original *become* an original. . . . The idea of the original is a back-formation from the difficulties of translation. . . . The trajectory from original to translation mimes the process of departing from an origin and thus enhances the belief that there *is* an origin.”²⁶ And so, although *Vocabulaire* sets out to give full weight to mistranslation and to treat departures from original meanings as meaningful in their own right, it nevertheless cannot help *but* posit something like origins. The more languages *Vocabulaire* includes, the more it gives the impression of aiming to reconstruct a whole, pre-Babelian language—as though, when put together, the divergent meanings might give better access to a truth (in this case, of philosophy or of Europe) than any one of them can do on its own. This too, Johnson argues, is an effect of the difficulties of translation, another back-formation: “The idea of that one original language might be a mere projection out of the process of translation.”²⁷

Paradoxically, then—for all its post-Babelian self-consciousness and the caution it takes to avoid uncovering one pure meaning—*Vocabulaire* implicitly promises to get at a true meaning all the more, even if it must emerge out of, or must be glued back together from, fragmentation and multiplicity. As Johnson puts it, “What makes us long for a perfect correspondence between words and meanings is our perception of its contingent lack in any existing language; that is, of its possibility in general. With a little tweaking, we think, we should surely be able to seize what seems so close!”²⁸ From the plurivocal chaos of *Vocabulaire* emerges an order after all, when the work of language in translation—of language revealed in its fundamentally inhuman character—subverts the human intent to effect a permanent breakage within philosophy, or to reveal its constitutive semantic impasses. Despite itself, *Vocabulaire* unwittingly constructs a founding—though avowedly post-Babelian—myth of wholeness, of European philosophy reconstituted out of shards of language. Without functioning as a center, the node of untranslatability nonetheless marks out a territory, historical and geographical, that admits only languages always already deemed subject to translation.²⁹

READING IN THE MODE OF TRANSLATION

Far removed from the traffic of universal ideas, *Historia* will demand a reading of a different kind. *History of Philosophy in Góral*—as one rendition of the Polish title into English might have it—is one of

Tischner's last works, and one of two published in the Góral dialect. Tischner himself grew up surrounded by the dialect before he went on to become a priest and to defend his doctorate at Jagiellonian University in Kraków under the direction of Roman Ingarden, the Polish phenomenologist, aesthetician, and student of Edmund Husserl. He later taught philology, philosophy, theology, and drama at universities in Kraków and Warszawa, and was also a popular sermonizer—with services for preschoolers in the 1970s, and homilies in the Góral dialect that attracted pilgrims from all over Poland—and a radio and television presence.³⁰ Tischner was also the first president of the Institute for Human Sciences, a forum for exchange between Western and Eastern European intellectuals, which he cofounded in Vienna with Hans-Georg Gadamer and Krzysztof Michalski in the early 1980s. *The Spirit of Solidarity* (1981)—a book based on “Solidarity of Consciences,” a sermon he delivered to leaders of the Solidarity union in October 1980—marks Tischner's effort to articulate an intellectual and ethical foundation for the workers' movement.³¹

What kind of reading, then, might *Historia filozofii po góralsku*—which undercuts from the beginning its own claim on truth—be calling for in its turn? It responds with its own silences and its own imperviousness. The initial shock encountered in reading the *History* is seeing this speech of a local folk in print.³² Góral may exhibit their colorful dress and their quaint accents to delight tourists but—for a speaker of “standard” Polish—their speech is otherwise strange, opaque, the kind of speech one cannot learn but must be born into. Here, this dialect unfolds as if it were a full-fledged language, no longer confined to odd-sounding fragments used only to amuse vacationers. The second shock in reading Tischner's *Historia filozofii* is the unexpected act of translation it demands. Already in the first line of the prologue, the speaker of “standard” Polish must turn *Na początku wsędy byli górale* into the “properly” Polish words *Na początku wszędzie byli górale*: in the beginning there were Góral everywhere. Or might *wsędy* mean not *wszędzie* (everywhere), but rather *wszyscy* (everyone)? This would mean instead that, in the beginning, “everyone was Góral”—turning a geographical claim into an ontological one. Many words from now on will be uncertain in this way, with an occasional word completely unintelligible. The speaker of “standard” Polish can access this text not by a perfect, denotative understanding but only through approximation, through its resonances with official Polish.

From the beginning, then, it is a reading in the mode of translation, a reading that foregrounds the relation of word to word—of the

almost-foreign word on the page to the “proper” word it seems to echo—instead of relying on an immediate, referential relation of word to world. The unaccustomed reader has an uncanny sense of understanding something never before seen or known to such an extent—even as it remains obscure and delightful, available and unavailable at the same time. *Is this my language or not?* The question frays the edges of standard Polish. The status of Góral as a dialect rather than a language forbids the attribute of absolute foreignness, and yet here it is, acting like a language, marked by undeniable self-sufficiency and strangeness.

Reading *Historia filozofii po góralsku* in the mode of translation, between Góral and Polish, reveals their boundaries, positing the two as full languages in their own right.³³ This revelation, in turn, questions the primacy of Polish as the correct, standard form that Góral only distorts; it erodes the idea of Polish as a point of departure for Góral and wears down the common notion that Góral is merely its heavily accented, impure version. By the time the third surprise registers—at the bold assertion, still in the prologue, that Góral was the original philosophers—the work of language has already cracked the surface of any stable idea of origin. Translation will function in this text in more than one way; the encounter with highlander speech is only the first. The book’s title may mean that this will simply be a rendering of the history of philosophy *into* Góral, otherwise unchanged. To recall Jacotot’s terms, Tischner’s *Historia filozofii po góralsku* would then simply explicate the accepted narrative of philosophy’s beginnings to his Góral audience and would make the learned tradition more accessible by putting it in their vernacular. But *po* in *po góralsku* means not only “in” or “in the language of”; it also means “in the manner of” and “according to.” *Po*, the only Polish word available to signal translation, allows considerable latitude.

Tischner exploits the ambivalence of *po* throughout the book, beginning with the prologue, which delivers the most surprising news: in the beginning, not only were there Góral everywhere, or there was no one except Góral, but “Górale byli tyz piyrnymi ‘filozofami’”—they were also the first “philosophers.” The prologue sets the stage for a complete overturning, a construction (or revelation) of a new (or ancient) myth (or truth): “‘Philosopher’—this is said in Greek. It means: a wise man [*mędrość*]. And it is said in Greek to dissimulate. Because, why should anyone know how it was in the beginning? But Greeks were not Greeks, only Góral who pretended to be Greek. Because in the beginning there

were no Greeks, only Góral everywhere.”³⁴ Góral is thus not only *not* a mere distortion of Polish or a remnant of highlander life; not only a language vested with the right to consider itself as an original, on a par with other languages. It is *the* original language of truth—even if the truth it contains or engenders, including the truth of its own primacy over others, had to be disguised right away through translation into Greek. What’s more, Greek does not exist independently of, or prior to, this purpose; it is invented by Góral as a cover. And the word *philosopher* is itself merely a smokescreen for the original *mędrol*. Translation emerges here as a veiling of the true nature of things—not just as an accidental effect of the inevitable shortcomings of languages or of their failure to coincide, but as a deliberate strategy. “Because, why should anyone know how it was in the beginning?” If the usual understanding of translation is that it strives, but often fails, to reveal the full truth of the original, here the essential function of translation is not to elucidate but to occlude.

None of the common notions, either of the history of philosophy or of translation itself, could have prepared us for this complete overturning. It goes beyond even the license built into *po* (which allows for Góral to retell this history in their own dialect, even *in their own way*, but not to make it wholly *theirs*). It does not fit, for example, John Dryden’s classic—and, in any case, commonsensical—categories of translation, which range from metaphrase to paraphrase and imitation. The first category, a literal “turning an author word by word, and line by line from one language into another,” is the overfaithful translation that is always the mark of a bad wordsmith but that is, nonetheless, unavoidable to posit, even if only as something to be left behind. Paraphrase—the middle and the only viable position to occupy—is “translation with latitude, where the author is kept in view . . . but his words are not strictly followed; that too is admitted to be amplified, but not altered.” The third way—as untenable as the first but just as inevitable to posit—is “imitation, where the translator (*if now he has not lost that name*) assumes the liberty, not only to vary from the words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion . . . taking only some general hints from the original.”³⁵

Tischner, then—despite the insistence of the book’s title that it is a kind of translation—comes close to losing the name of “translator” altogether; he promises a *re*-telling but, instead, denies the authority of the original by telling a new, competing myth. Yet if the idea of *an* origin of philosophy is to hold, both stories cannot be true. Tischner

takes the license of *po* to the extreme: with enough liberty, he comes—as if full circle—to contradict the original. Already in the prologue, this little book—which promises to be a translation but isn't, and which at the same time demands translation in the very act of reading—foregrounds the struggle inherent in translation, the suppression of enmity required of any “good” translation that submits to the original. The book foregrounds, as well, the often-hidden proprietary right of the source text: it belongs to this *or* that people, the Greeks, not the Góral, and must be borrowed only with the owner's permission. The “good” translation, in other words, must carry the stamp of ownership like an *ex libris*. Translators of ancient Greek and Latin texts, Dryden included, as well as later philosophers (all engaged in a “good” translation of the ancient tradition) have found a way to turn this into a lineage proper to Europe. But what happens when source and target are of radically unequal standing? What would it mean for Góral, an indigenous people living in an Eastern European country and thus at least doubly removed from philosophy proper, to access this lineage? Can “European” philosophy, itself a translation of the Greek origin, be retranslated in its turn?

To be sure, some degree of departure is expected of Tischner, as it is of any good translator. But if contemporary theories of translation take it for granted that strict fidelity is a problem, few escape the idea of fidelity altogether. Even in Dryden's time—and, before him, in Horace's time (note the authoritative words of the ancient master: *Nec verbum verbo curabis reddere, fidus / Interpres*, “Nor word for word too faithfully translate”)—no one took seriously the kind of servile translation based on “a faith like that which proceeds from superstition, blind and zealous.” But the injunction to depart from the original still carries with it the idea of fidelity—even if only as the bad model to be left behind. Any model of a “good” translation that follows from this repudiation cannot free itself from *some* notion, and some appropriate measure, of fidelity. Translation cannot do away with the original—which, in this case, is also to say with the hierarchy inherent in gaining access to a patrimony or an inheritance. Dryden's condemnation of imitation brings this into focus more clearly: on this least-faithful end of the spectrum, something “excellent may be invented, perhaps more excellent than the first design. . . . Yet he who is inquisitive to know an author's thoughts will be disappointed . . . and 'tis not always that a man will be contented to have a present made him, when he expects the payment of a debt.”³⁶ A translation ceases to be good when it forgets

the debt and offers itself instead as if it were a gift, with the presumption of reciprocity that gesture entails.

And so Tischner refuses to acknowledge the debt and chooses to offer a gift, as if it were his to offer in the first place. But Dryden himself—to follow his reflections one more step—appears to realize that his own categories do not hold. In the end, for one who lacks the innate capacity to translate, “All particular precepts are of no other use than to make him a more remarkable coxcomb.” (This is also what unsuccessful mimicry—in an act of cultural translation—might look like.) All carefully laid out categories will only mislead the one who needs them to begin with. After all this, a good translator must only “perfectly comprehend the genius and sense of his author. . . . And then he will express himself as justly, and with as much life, *as if he wrote an original*.”³⁷ The theorist of good translation jettisons his own careful schemas only to return to the unhelpful definition: translation, by nature, resists a satisfactory theory; it is the transmittal of ineffable genius.

This, finally, is the one guideline for good translation that Tischner may be seen to follow to the letter: writing *as if* he were writing an original. Only, in the same breath as he offers a gift instead of acknowledging a debt, he takes the *as if* literally, to the point of *actually* writing an original. Yet, as Barbara Johnson notes, it cannot be otherwise: “*As if* is something that cannot happen right if it happens in the mode of *as if*.”³⁸ *Reading* a text, she reminds us, means acting as if it were alive and present to us rather than as belonging to a historical progression of ideas, one superseded by the next. It means understanding that “thought as a *break* is different from thought as a *chain*.” Reading a text as if it made a difference to us, in other words, depends on “pausing there long enough” to suspend disbelief (in the case of literature) and to put critical distance on hold (in the case of theory).³⁹

Tischner’s quarrel with translation—more precisely, with its devotion to fidelity—forces the reader to pause there long enough. The little rhetorical question in the prologue “Why should anyone know how it was in the beginning?” and the insistence that translation means to conceal, not to reveal, break the chain of thought as an inheritance and upset the respectable order of ideas. Even if only for a moment, for the duration of its reading, *Historia filozofii po góralsku* takes Góral out of a double concealment: the first by the Polish language (from which they otherwise only deviate), the second by the weight of European philosophy (with which their only imaginable connection is to have it explicated to them).

The tangled logic of the prologue certainly requires a suspension of disbelief. How could Góral's have *pretended to be Greeks* (*udawali greka*), for example, if Greeks did not yet exist as an available cover? Does this mean Góral's invented Greek at the same time as they invented philosophy, engaged in a kind of double-speak from the beginning? What's more, the Polish idiom *udawać greka* means to play dumb or to plead ignorance. Its playful invocation in the prologue turns Greeks themselves into the ignorant ones—or, alternately, gives the original Góral's an alibi: they knew full well what they were doing when they were inventing philosophy. How, finally, are we to understand the question “Why should anyone know how it was in the beginning”? Our reading of the book will get snagged, again and again, on this little rhetorical question. If this retelling of the history of philosophy wants to pose as a correction of the record, why does it sabotage itself and question the need to know anything to begin with?

There are ways to make sense of this dizzying logic: as a taste of the kind of folk (rather than learned) wisdom, perhaps, that the book will put on full display. It must make sense to *them*, speakers of that quaint dialect, who do not know anything of philosophy—a simple person's reasoning. Or it may be recognized as yet another protestation of an Eastern European—no, really, we *are* important. For a people “fated to unoriginality,” as Derek Walcott has put it in a different context, there is no other recourse than to assert originality all the more forcefully, even if no one believes it.⁴⁰ The careless logic may also be telling us something about Góral's, albeit obliquely: they take what they need, invent their own traditions, and do not acknowledge any debts. The appearance of isolation from the outside world, after all, is a vital part of the tourist economy they depend on; cunning underneath the veneer of simplicity, they could not survive without fabricating their own indigenoussness. Maybe *this* is what *po góral'sku* means: they borrow and pretend it was theirs all along; this is the Góral way of doing things.⁴¹

But to suspend disbelief means to take the text on its own terms, not to put it in its place on a chain of thought arranged according to geo-cultural or social hierarchies. The apparently confused logic—whose dizzying turns, combined with a tone of coy simplicity and the opacity of the language itself, make Tischner's book hilarious, wistful, and charming by turns—might finally belong to the *mędroł*, the original (word for) “philosopher.” But “philosopher”—we are told right away—cannot translate *mędroł*. It is not just inaccurate but deliberately misleading, since “it is said in Greek to hide the truth.” It is

possible to *read* the word *mędrol*, if only in the mode of translation: it comes close to two Polish words, *mędrzec* (a venerable sage) and *mędrek* (an amateur philosophizer, sometimes only a profound fool), and so the Góral word might veer toward one or the other, or it might have its own meaning altogether, bypassing the opposition between learning and common sense, between actual wisdom and posturing, that the two Polish words connote. But, because it is only an approximate reading, through the veil of the Polish language, *mędrol* itself is inaccessible: the text does not offer synonyms that might help tease out its precise meaning *in* Góral. This meaning is tangled up in the difficulty of translating this dialect, this partial language, into either Polish or English. *Mędrol* is untranslatable in a way that many words in this book will be. Its untranslatability, in turn, suspends the hierarchy between a learned and a common person's reasoning. The word must stand on its own, not fully explained.

MĘDROL PHILOSOPHY

As might be expected of a proper intellectual history, *Historia filozofii po góralsku* contains a few dozen biographical portraits, each in its turn framed by a prologue that pretends to provide its proper context. The first, the story of Thales of Miletus (who is only *said* to have originated philosophy), begins with the storyteller's appeal to truth that will be repeated, in different forms, before every story: "I will now tell you how it really was with these philosophers [*mędrolami*]. The pure truth I will say. Because, what interest do I have to lie? In the books, the first *mędrol* is called Thales, but his real name was 'Stasek Nędza not of Miletus but of Pardałówka.'" This, then, is how it really was: "Disguised under the name of Thales of Miletus," Stasek Nędza (Nędza meaning Misery, in the sense of penury rather than mere unhappiness) was the son of a shepherd. His father often took him to town to guard the horse carriage while he went to the market. "But Stasek was bored to tears sitting there on the carriage and sitting. And sit he had to. So from this boredom thinking came to him. And he turned into a *mędrol*" (7).

But philosophy, coming to a peasant out of mundane necessity, is not immediately accorded respect. "There were some who laughed at him. One time he went up a hill at night to look at the stars and fell into a hole. Kaśka z Nędzówki [a woman] saw it and blabbered all over

the village: ‘Ha, he’s no kind of *mędroł*, he can’t see what’s under his feet, and he wants to know what’s in the sky.’” If *mędroł* reasoning will turn out to be firmly grounded in Góral reality, the reasoning of Góral women (for—except the Queen of Sheba, who was not the Queen of Sheba at all but Jewcia of Ludźmierz—*mędroł* is otherwise male) will be more down-to-earth still: women’s logic, uncompromisingly pragmatic, will check their pretensions to self-importance and challenge them to prove their usefulness. Stasek eventually makes a name for himself, so that “today even schoolchildren learn about ‘Thales’s dictum,’ which is to say the dictum of Stasek Nędza of Pardałówka.” But the dictum never comes as a straightforward statement. There is a story instead: “When they were building the church tower in town, they ran out of measure [*się im skóńczyła miara*] and didn’t know if it was time to finish the tower or if not yet. And if it wasn’t for Stasek, it would be a second tower of Babel.” Stasek averts disaster by finding a way to measure the tower by measuring its shadow at the time of day when the shadow of a man equals the height of the man himself. “That’s when Stasek said: ‘Fellows, enough.’ And so this tower stands to this day. Stasek had a head on his shoulders after all.”⁴²

The dictum that originates “philosophy” is thus not an axiom but an act. When the first *mędroł* stops the construction of a would-be Babel, he also stops the otherwise inevitable dispersal of peoples and tongues, and the alienation of language from world. Thanks to this act, Góral speech remains perfectly referential, and so the thinking that comes out of it is also impossibly literal—so prosaic, in fact, as to come full circle to being poetic. Even their own proper name, Góral, comes from the word *góry* (mountains), and thus literally means “people of the mountains.” The effect of perfect referentiality of Góral speech is a result, in the first instance, of its untranslatability, proper to a local dialect far removed from national culture and administrative centers; but it is also a result of Tischner’s own use of the dialect, which emphasizes its rootedness not only in the specific locality of the Podhale region but, more concretely still, in everyday objects and the natural environment.

This concreteness emerges fully in the story of Hippocrates, who was really Wincenty Galica of Bioły Dunajec. (“He invented the oath that they call ‘the Hippocratic oath.’ But how can it be called that if there was no Hippocrates,” the tireless storyteller reminds us.)⁴³ Before this first doctor in Podhale, people believed sickness came from bad spirits or evil spells; they would look up and down three times to make it go away. Galica, instead, tackled sickness through reasoning—opposed

to magic and myth, but specific to *mędrol* wisdom nonetheless. He explained:

With sickness it's as if someone played false notes in music. You're pulling the first tones, and another is pulling the second. He's pulling badly. All the playing is for nothing. Same with the bass. The first instrument—let's say it plays well, the second still okay, but the bassist dozes off. All goes bad. Sickness is when nature gets out of tune [*rozstrojenie w naturze*]. It's like a screech. . . . And the doctor that heals is a tuner of nature. He'll grab the tuning screws, loosen here, tighten there, knock, listen and . . . it plays! So he does with a person. An artist! Only for people.⁴⁴

The passage plays literally on the double meaning of *rozstrojenie*—“being out of tune” in the case of musical instruments as well as in psychological or nervous conditions. Health means harmony and the ability to play well. This notion of healing a person being akin to tuning an instrument makes the instruments, too, come alive, united with their players through the same air that animates everything. The story of the first doctor ends on a mournful note, when the absence of good music means disaster: “When the mountain wind [*wiater holny*] came and people got all out of tune somehow, and they hanged themselves, he cut through their ropes, blew good wind into them and gave them back their spirit. But he didn't give the spirit back to all of them, only to those that weren't cold already. Hey, for a cold one, even music won't help.”⁴⁵ The mountains, the people who live there, and the instruments they play are inseparable, so that, when nature itself gets out of tune and brings a hostile wind, there is only solitude and silence. This is the havoc disharmony can wreak.

It is not sadness, however, that Góral's seek—they are the ones, indeed, who first realized the value of joy. The search for joy (as opposed to mere pleasure, the centerpiece of the better-known but mistaken teaching of hedonism) is so proper to the highlanders that for something to be told *po góralsku*, in the Góral way, may finally mean for it to have a happy ending. This is revealed in a story about Socrates's death—or, rather, about “how Xanthippe, the wife of Jędrzek Kudasik, the Podhalian Socrates, taught the judges and saved the man his life”: “You must know that Greeks turned everything upside down. . . . They weren't glad to hear stories that ended well. They liked bad endings much better. Antigone had to hang herself, Socrates had to poison himself—this made them happy. With Góral's, it's different, they like what ends

well. The story of Antigone would be worth anything only if her rope broke. With Socrates—that is, with Jędrzek Kudasik—it happened that his wife Wanda, not any Xanthippe, took matters in her own hands and pulled the man out of trouble.”⁴⁶ His wife, who draws a crowd of women to witness the trial, speaks before the court so eloquently that judges are “softened” by her speech and by their beauty, and they not only pardon him but even give him a pension. “And so it all ended nicely in the Góral way [*po góralsku*], and not how the Greeks later wrote it down.”⁴⁷ If, for the reader, the story is a humorous retelling of Socrates’s actually tragic story, the narrator here insists that what we think is the original is itself only a rewriting. Throughout the book, this reversal is already attempted by the displacement of Greek names and by the repeated claim that *this* is the true history of philosophy. But the story of Socrates’s rescue suggests something further: that all of the history of philosophy may be mere storytelling, shaped by generic conventions and by the listeners’ character more than by fidelity to truth.

The last chapter (entitled simply “It’s time to finish, enough . . .”) discloses the narrator’s intention: “It’d be wrong to say that this is all that can be said about Góral wisdom. I wasn’t going after telling the whole story. I was only telling you this, so that you—my dear ones—would know how to open your ears and listen to the song of Góral forefathers that flows like this stream next to us.”⁴⁸ The intention is to teach his listeners to think, rather than to teach them a particular history—to teach them to invent and to understand rather than to recount. It is directly related to his own story’s unfinished status: if the truth of how it was in the beginning is not the point, then the ending remains equally open to revision. Yet people do often want to know how it really was, asking: “Those Góral *mędrols* from before the ages somehow have today’s names and walk around next to us; so, are they from today or from before?” But he tells them only: “It could be this or that. And even names like to repeat themselves. Maybe they are from before . . . maybe from today. . . . Think whatever suits you.”⁴⁹ Just as the history of philosophy is overturned in Tischner’s account, so history itself loses its proper aspect: the past and present may coexist, the past may repeat itself or it may have many versions. Or, finally, it may not have happened at all: just as with Thomas Aquinas, the last *mędrol* in the book, who “didn’t exist either.”⁵⁰

In the end, *Historia* does not uncover any straightforward truth and does not convey any verifiable content—either to the Góral listeners about the history of philosophy, or to the reader about Góral. It is,

thus, neither a work of intellectual history nor a work of ethnography. Despite its constant reference to veiling and unveiling, it does not uncover anything beyond the mere intention to communicate—the mark of pure language that Walter Benjamin thought was the only thing revealed through translation. The most lasting purpose of the book may be simply to make Góral exist, for the duration of the storytelling, in their own language. For even as the book playfully revises Góral identity it is also nostalgic, as if it aimed to forestall the disappearance of their speech. The last chapter ends on a mournful note: “If the world did not exist, it would be a shame. And it would be an even bigger shame if in this world there were no mountains and no Góral. And that’s why they sing: ‘When we go from here, it will be a shame / On the mountains, in the valleys, water will cry.’”⁵¹ There is a strange circularity running through the logic of the book. A translation that is not really a translation poses for an original; a people that may be nobly indigenous or merely backward turns out to be actually ancient; and the original may some day disappear.

Told *as if* it belonged to Góral, Tischner’s history of philosophy bypasses the cultural hierarchies involved in the transmission of a tradition and inflects translation with the assumption of radical equality. If instead of repaying a debt Tischner offers a gift, and points to philosophy not as a given but as a gift, it is because a common Europe can be envisioned only as a space of reciprocity and freedom.⁵² Thought, as Rancière insists in recounting Jacotot’s experience, “is translated for someone else, who will make of it another tale, another translation, on one condition: the will to communicate, the will to figure out what the other is thinking, and this under no guarantee beyond his narration, no universal dictionary to dictate what must be understood.”⁵³ The ethics of translation as a relation to knowledge based on the assumption of equality does not regard knowledge as an embodiment of a truth to be preserved and passed down. It gives priority to thought as something that takes place in an encounter between persons—the intention to communicate, over and above any content to be transmitted with fidelity.

TRANSLATIONAL ETHICS

Tischner offers a vision for a postnational European future quite distinct from that imagined by Cassin’s *Vocabulaire* or that implemented by the EU itself. In revising an untenable model of Europe and working

against a new lingua franca—whether of philosophy or of the perfect exchangeability presumed by the European market—Cassin’s admirable project mistakenly focuses on national languages and traditions as the locus of difference. The transnational ambition of *Vocabulaire* manages to transcend only the focus on single nations, while it inadvertently upholds the national as such. Though it displaces any notion of one, absolute origin of philosophy, it validates its self-appointed inheritors, who in their apparent multiplicity come to constitute a new original. Linguistic difference, in turn, is conceived only as a difference from an original philosopheme (whether in Greek or in another classical language), and *Vocabulaire* cannot account for internal linguistic differences—for the fact that a standard national language is always *already* constituted through a traversal of differences across multiple localities. Compared to the European Union’s twenty-three official languages that include those of the new member states, along with a host of recognized Regional and Minority Languages (RMLs), *Vocabulaire* appears strangely out of step and narrow in scope.

On its part, the technocratic project of the EU—for all its respect for differences—does not recognize the existence of Góral speech; having first defined the terms of such recognition, it withholds it from those dialects that do not accede to the status of RMLs. The EU’s policy of multilingualism represents, in any case, the promotion of differences from above, as an abstract value that may be implemented without accounting for, or confronting, any actual differences. For Alain Badiou, who is suspicious of such elevation of differences for their own sake, the EU’s “attempt to promote the cultural virtue of the oppressed subsets, this invocation of language in order to extol communitarian particularisms,” is akin to the operation of “monetary abstraction, whose false universality has absolutely no difficulty accommodating the kaleidoscope of communitarianisms.”⁵⁴ Particularism, for Badiou, is both destructive (because ultimately hateful) *and* too easily co-opted by the logic of the market, in which “the semblance of a non-equivalence is required so that equivalence itself can constitute a process.”⁵⁵ For him, true universalism must bypass identitarian singularity, on the model of Saint Paul’s teaching, in which “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female.”⁵⁶ The universal Pauline subject is constituted through the structure of address, in which the One speaks to all regardless of identity and thus inaugurates a new collectivity, because “the universal is the only possible correlate of the One.”⁵⁷ In this kind of universality, differences are transcended and collapsed.

Historia, along with Tischner's other works, points out the limitations in the ways in which both *Vocabulaire* and the EU negotiate particularity, and it proposes an altogether different notion of universality from Badiou's. None of them, indeed, can account for the local as it is bespoken in Tischner's work. The dialogical situation lies at the root of Tischner's ethics, more fully elaborated in his other works. In distinction to a notion of freedom defined as the capacity to act on the outside world and as protection from being acted upon, Tischner proposes a notion of freedom that "is an ability to perform *inner* acts, a *self*-definition." Importantly, it emerges in the dialogical plane, where "the problem of freedom is: to answer or not to answer a question posed to me; to follow or not to follow the call directed to me; to share or not to share bread; to kill or not to kill?"⁵⁸ This freedom in being together, in responsiveness and responsibility to the other who is necessarily unpredictable in her or his own freedom, is intimately tied to finding a good that would be good for both, without relinquishing one's own sense of the good in the encounter.

In *Słowo o ślebodzie* (Word about freedom), a series of homilies Tischner delivered in the Góral dialect in Turbacz, in the Podhale region, every August between 1981 and 1997, freedom is also clearly tied to the idea of home as the locality in which one first learns to exercise freedom. As Tischner says in the first sermon, the properly Góral word *śleboda* is not the same as the free rein or the unconstrained license to do what one pleases that the standard-Polish word closest to it, *swawola*, connotes. Because this meaning of "freedom" is inseparable from its location, *śleboda* is "what a farmer feels in his own land. It is something distinct from *swawola*. *Swawola* destroys, *swawola* tramples. It doesn't look: grass or not grass, grain or not grain. . . . *Swawola* destroys. *Śleboda* is wise. *Śleboda* knows how to take care, knows how to till the land. It protects the forest so that it can be a forest. And in a person, *śleboda* can bring out the best that is within."⁵⁹ Even as the Góral is a figure for the local, however, this locality does not entail a hermetic self-enclosure, either in the Tatra mountains or within the dialect spoken only by its people. On the contrary, the local is the necessary, and the only viable, position from which an other may be encountered, as well as the guarantee of one's own freedom, which must be exercised from within. Through frequent references to the history of insurrection and armed struggle originating in Podhale but carried out for the sake of the Polish nation or for the self-determination of the peasants, Tischner extends the meaning

of the local—it is rooted in a particular place but oriented outward in responsibility to an other.⁶⁰

Here, finally, may be the contribution of Tischner's Góral philosophy, not only to the problem of Europe as a community of equals, but also to the problem of a postnational European future: a differential ethics of the encounter, with translation being the fundamental relation between self and other that guarantees freedom, so that the self does not become dissolved in the other. It implies neither destructive communitarianism nor abstract difference ripe for exploitation by the market, but instead a firm grounding in the local. If, for Badiou, the only alternatives are an ethically suspect universality based on a multiplicity of abstracted differences on the one hand and the Pauline eschewal of all particularity on the other hand, for Tischner there is a third. It is much closer to the Pentecostal than to the Pauline tradition, a tradition that maintains the inescapable multiplicity of tongues. The ethical aspect of translation depends on a structure of address quite different than the address of One to all—it is an address of a one to a one, each delimiting one's own freedom in anticipation of the other's unpredictable response.

Conclusion

“What do you want us to say?” This is a question that—according to participants in a recent roundtable on the state of humanities research in Eastern Europe—local scholars in the region often ask as they apply for grants from Western funding organizations. One roundtable participant shared his own criteria for selecting work he deemed worthy of support: doable, narrow projects that produce tangible results. These criteria were not arbitrary, he argued. He was merely being “receptive to their needs” when he rejected abstract, eclectic projects inspired by “foreign” theories in which local scholars had no proper training. Another reviewer of grant applications and book proposals, also present, said simply that he valued *sincerity*. “I tell them that I want them to be sincere.”¹

This book has been produced in a context of relative material privilege and intellectual freedom incomparable to the conditions in which many “local” Eastern European scholars find themselves. Because it is subject to similar dictates, however, it intervenes to displace the notions of cultural boundedness, transparency, and self-coincidence that underlie such demands for local scholars to give a clear account of their situations in their own words. These nativist and essentialist notions depend on the possibility of adjudicating what is proper to a culture or a place and what, in contrast, lies outside it. They also perpetuate an international division of intellectual labor that cordons the universal off from the particular—that assigns the production of

theoretical models to the West and charges the rest with the footwork of archival and empirical research to produce usable information; and they deny the power relation inherent in transnational grant making. Paradoxically, it is the local scholars who know better, who suspect there are standards they are not aware of, while the reviewer insists that they—simply and honestly—be themselves. Most insidiously, the statements cited above dismiss the “local” scholars’ capacity to read. As the first speaker explained, he prefers that they go to the West, learn theory there, and bring that training back home. “Foreign” sources, by implication, must be explicated; they must not be subject to misreading, misuse, or unpoliced appropriation.

Through its focus on rhetoric, language, and reading, *Form and Instability* has labored to undo this diffuse yet persistent paradigm that still governs knowledge production about the region. The legacy of area studies—as a set of epistemological constraints, implicit notions about the purpose and propriety of scholarly work, naturalized cultural boundaries, and gestures of self-disciplining, all mobilized to contain Eastern Europe as a stable object—is not merely, then, a vestige of a Cold War organization of knowledge confined to a lagging periphery of US academia. Obsolete as it may seem, it works prospectively to perpetuate the discursive construction of Eastern Europe, with material consequences for the future. In rethinking the imputed self-evidence of cultural boundaries through language and literature, this book undermines the fixity of Eastern Europe as a discrete space without, at the same time, inscribing it wholesale into Europe, the “globe,” or the “postcolonial”—all of which appear to offer alternative terms and means for unfastening Eastern Europe from its isolation and for rendering it newly visible. The intervention this book has aimed to make may best be captured in Roland Barthes’s reflection on interdisciplinary work. Such work, he writes, “is not about confronting already constituted disciplines. . . . It’s not enough to choose a ‘subject’ (a theme) and gather around it two or three sciences. Interdisciplinarity consists in *creating a new object that belongs to no one.*”² Creating something anew, then, means also dispossessing it of its accumulated associations and dislodging it from its place.

The tracing of new relations, pursued in this book, is only incidentally justified by debates in “world” literature, which invite and finally sanction impure crossings and associations. Globalization in its empirical manifestations—such as new forms of migration or heightened transnational interdependence—is likewise only a pretext for

bringing together diverse sources. For the central premise here is not merely that now, in the contemporary moment, as Eastern Europe itself is being integrated in new ways into global economic, institutional, and cultural networks, it is both timely and appropriate to articulate it in ways that might better serve this integration with the rest of the world. What emerges in each chapter, instead, is an account of Eastern Europe as always-already noncoincident with itself. Insisting—as the grant reviewers in the above anecdote implicitly do—that the time has come for Eastern Europeans to finally express in their own language what is proper to them makes unintelligible and illegible the inevitably mediated kinds of experience this book brings to light. Such insistence also reinforces the historicist narrative of progress in which post-1989 liberation might be said to consist in finally being able to emerge from underneath a false condition.

In my reading of Konwicki's novel as an allegory of irony in the first chapter, and in my treatment, in the second chapter, of the ongoing accession to Europe as a process marked by a discursive deficit and centrally concerned with deixis, the "actual" condition of Eastern Europe turns out to be *not* something merely distorted or denied by a false construction imposed from outside. These two chapters point to a fundamental misprision that must be seen to attend any instance of knowledge production as soon as language—not only the medium but also the very site of this knowledge production—is considered in its rhetorical dimension. The instability attributed to Eastern Europe as an object in transition, or as a region "in between" Europe and not-Europe, then, belongs more properly to the very languages that attempt to capture it. At the same time, as the Eastern European writers considered here engage in articulating, reimagining, or contesting their situation, the apparently external discursive construction turns out to be internal to that situation—not only as a political or contextual constraint of their works' reception, but as an aesthetic, formal imperative in their production.

The last three chapters—on Conrad, Gombrowicz, and Tischner—focus on reading as a basis for forging new relations, rather than on establishing Eastern Europe as a reformulated object that might better fit into available alternatives to its status as an object of area studies only. On this most general level, then, these three chapters also contribute to debates on world literature, which are marked by a misprision similar to the one afflicting social scientific and empiricist efforts to account for historical change discussed in the first two chapters. What

both approaches to novelty—the one focused on tracking the new in its real-world manifestations, the other seeking to expand a restricted field to include new entrants—have in common is that they treat the object of their study (Eastern Europe here, noncanonical traditions there) as eminently unstable while they maintain intact the implicit assumptions about already-established epistemic frames and procedures. To put it more simply, assumptions about the transparency of language and the timeliness of positivist models of knowledge production within “post-socialist” studies on the one hand, and the presumption, on the other hand, that the canonical, Western, or core literatures have already been read and that the central problem is to incorporate new objects alongside them, both have a similar effect. They leave undisturbed the horizons of expectation in which the dominant is the given.

In the last three chapters, finally, a rhetorical dimension of twentieth-century history—a dimension articulated from the point of view of writers engaged in contesting the unicity and the self-evidence of “Europe” as a dominant frame of reference—emerges. Modernist irony is followed by postmodernist form and turns into the concern with translation in the chaotic, yet-unnamed present. Each of these rhetorical modes renegotiates, to different effects, the settled relations between language, cultural difference, and available analytical categories. If the reception of Conrad’s oeuvre is marked by the persistence of binaries—democracy and despotism, Western and Eastern Europe, Europe and the postcolonial world—then irony disrupts such binaries by introducing the possibility that more than two categories may be operating at any moment. Gombrowicz’s theory of form marks a more profound breakdown, with a multiplicity of terms always at the ready to dictate thoughts, behaviors, and events; language and world are at once radically divorced from each other, in the recognition of the priority of language and of its nonrepresentational, inhuman quality—and, at the same time, more closely implicated. In my reading of Tischner in the mode of translation, in turn, even single words refuse self-evidence and insist on their intrinsic multiplicity, so that it is no longer possible to read the culturally other text for cultural information. For Tischner, then, there is no such thing as a native informant. In each chapter, reading—as a way of taking the writer at his word; as a cognitive-aesthetic process of apprehension that takes place at the threshold of determination; and as an encounter with the otherness of language—makes visible that which continually escapes our ever-reformable frames of intelligibility.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. See, for instance, Alan Dingsdale, *Mapping Modernities: Geographies of Central and Eastern Europe, 1920–2000* (London: Routledge, 2002); Jacques Rupnik, *The Other Europe* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988); or Iver Neumann, *Uses of the Other: “The East” in European Identity Formation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

2. Milica Bakić-Hayden, “Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia,” *Slavic Review* 54, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 917–31.

3. For the connotations of “Eastern enlargement” in the context of the expansion of the European Union, see Merje Kuus, “Europe’s Eastern Expansion and the Reinscription of Otherness in East-Central Europe,” *Progress in Human Geography* 28, no. 4 (2004): 472–89.

4. Daniel Chirot, introduction to *The Origins of Backwardness in Eastern Europe: Economics and Politics from the Middle Ages until the Early Twentieth Century*, ed. Daniel Chirot (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 3.

5. *Ibid.*, 12.

6. Philip Longworth, *The Making of Eastern Europe: From Prehistory to Postcommunism* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1997), 6.

7. John Darnton, “Union, but Not Unanimity, as Europe’s East Joins West,” *New York Times*, March 11, 2004.

8. Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 8.

9. Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 40.

10. Milan Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe," trans. Edmund White, *New York Review of Books*, April 26, 1984. There is a striking resemblance between Kundera's notion of Central Europe and the way in which Joseph Conrad characterizes the predicament of partitioned Poland in his 1916 essay "A Note on the Polish Problem," in Joseph Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 108–13.

11. The specific attributes of "Central Europe" as much as its boundaries have been open to debate, whose contours would be impossible to reproduce here. The 1989 volume *In Search of Central Europe*, ed. George Schöpflin and Nancy Wood (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), presents a comprehensive and sympathetic view of this debate through its representative texts. Maria Todorova, in contrast, provides a longer history and a critical analysis of the term, focusing on its mythical aspects and its political misuses ("Between Classification and Politics: The Balkans and the Myth of Central Europe," in *Imagining the Balkans* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997], 140–60).

12. Todorova, "Between Classification and Politics," 156.

13. Dubravka Ugrešić, *Nobody's Home*, trans. Ellen Elias-Bursac (Rochester, NY: Open Letter, 2008), 91.

14. *Ibid.*, 95.

15. *Ibid.*, 92.

16. *Ibid.*, 89.

17. *Ibid.*, 93.

18. *Ibid.*, 94, emphases mine.

19. Salman Rushdie, "Kapuściński's Angola," in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981–1991* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 206.

20. Thus this is not a book *about* Poland, and it does not privilege Poland as emblematic of Eastern Europe. Poland is considered here, rather, insofar as it shares in the condition of Eastern Europe and can help illuminate it.

21. Timothy Bahti, *Allegories of History: Literary Historiography after Hegel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 204.

22. Hans Robert Jauss, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 3–45.

23. Debates on these three ways of delimiting the proper objects of literary subdisciplines (Europe, nation, identity) are not equally developed or visible, and these categories have different historical trajectories and are not equally recognized as problematic. Comparative literature is the primary site of the first exploration (for instance, in the works of Emily Apter, David Damrosch, Natalie Melas, Franco Moretti, Haun Saussy, and Gayatri Spivak). In American literary studies, there have been attempts to denationalize the canon, though they have yet to find their reverberations; see Wai-Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), and Wai-Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell, eds., *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007). Nele Bemong,

Mirjam Truwant, and Pieter Vermeulen's edited volume *Re-thinking Europe: Literature and (Trans)national Identity* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008) represents an incipient attempt at formulating a postnational, continental literary space in Europe. Examples of dissatisfaction with the third, identity-based category include the now-defunct question of an Anglophone Commonwealth literature (see, e.g., Salman Rushdie, "Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist," in *Imaginary Homelands*, 203–6) and the paradoxical effect of ghettoization noted by scholars of ethnic and women-of-color literatures in the United States (see, e.g., Abdul JanMohammed and David Lloyd, *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1990], and Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj, eds., *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers* [New York: Garland, 2000]). The last instance is especially paradoxical because institutional recognition accorded to African American, Asian American, or Native American writers has had the effect of keeping them apart from mainstream "American" literature.

24. Natalie Melas, "Humanity/Humanities: Decolonization and the Poetics of Relation," *Topoi* 18 (1999): 13–28.

25. The parameters of these debates will be found in David Chioni Moore's "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique," *PMLA* 116, no. 1 (January 2001): 111–28; Clare Cavanagh's "Postcolonial Poland," *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 1 (2004): 82–92; "Are We Postcolonial? Post-Soviet Space," Forum: Conference Debates, *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (2005): 828–36; and Dorota Kołodziejczyk and Cristina Şandru, introduction to "On Colonialism, Communism, and East-Central Europe," special issue, ed. Dorota Kołodziejczyk and Cristina Şandru, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48, no. 2 (2012): 113–16.

26. The problem is posed in precisely these terms in Dariusz Skórczewski's "Postkolonialna Polska—Projekt (nie)możliwy," *Teksty Drugie* 1–2 (2006): 100–112. In the pages of the same journal, a special issue is devoted to an aspect of this debate, proposing "postdependence" as an alternative, and more precise, frame: Marta Zielińska, ed., "Postkolonialni czy postzależni?" [Postcolonial or postdependent?], special issue, *Teksty Drugie* 5, no. 125 (2010).

27. In comparative literature in particular, this critical context might be located approximately between the two decennial State of the Discipline Reports edited by Charles Bernheimer and Haun Saussy, respectively—the former concerned with multiculturalism and the latter with globalization. With a few exceptions, the subsequent and most recent 2014 Report betrays no comparable problematics, signaling that, perhaps, these debates have been exhausted. But the exhaustion is temporary, and the questions remain unresolved and merely suspended or transmuted. See Charles Bernheimer, ed. *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); and Haun Saussy, ed., *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006). For an illuminating overview of these critical turns in a longer historical

perspective, see Natalie Melas, “Grounds for Comparison,” in *All the Difference in the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 1–43.

28. There are two discernible ways in which Eastern Europe does figure in recent comparative literature debates: first, it is often remarked that the founding “fathers” of comparative literature, and of literary theory, were Central European émigrés and war refugees, although this assertion does not translate into an equitable appreciation or visibility of Eastern European literatures within the discipline itself (see Galin Tihanov, “Why Did Modern Literary Theory Originate in Central and Eastern Europe? (And Why Is It Now Dead?),” in *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 1 (2004): 61–81); second, Eastern Europe or more often Central Europe is proffered as a model of an older cosmopolitanism, proper to a place that was multilingual and multiethnic *avant la lettre*—long before such values become fashionable in the West (for an example of this mythologizing claim to relevance, see Caryl Emerson, “Answering for Central and Eastern Europe,” in Saussy, *Comparative Literature*, 203–11).

29. Stephen Heath, “The Politics of Genre,” in *Debating World Literature*, ed. Christopher Prendergast (London: Verso, 2004), 174.

30. Paul de Man, “Criticism and Crisis,” in *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 17.

31. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 61.

32. Anita Starosta, “Imagine an Albanian Joyce: An Interview with Yuri Andrukhovych,” in “Second-Hand Europe,” ed. Wlad Godzich and Anita Starosta, special issue, *boundary 2* 41, no. 1 (2014): 37.

33. *Ibid.*, 45.

34. With respect to narratives of progress and lag, Stasiuk’s work is aligned with the intervention Wlad Godzich makes when he replaces notions of lag with a notion of nonsynchronicity. See his “March 1968 in Poland,” *boundary 2* 36, no. 1 (2009): 7–26.

35. Yuri Andrukhovych and Andrzej Stasiuk, *Moja Europa: Dwa eseje o Europie zwanej rodkow* [My Europe: Two essays about a Europe called central] (Wołowiec: Czarne, 2007), 135–36, my translation.

36. I can only signal these distinctions here, but they will become clearer, especially, in light of chapter 4, “Countries of Degraded Form,” on Witold Gombrowicz’s notion of form.

37. Wlad Godzich, “*Sekend-Hand Europe*,” in Godzich and Starosta, “Second-Hand Europe,” 2.

CHAPTER I

1. Tadeusz Konwicki, *A Minor Apocalypse*, trans. Richard Lourie (New York: Vintage, 1984), 222. I modified Lourie’s translation of “Umiera Ukraina, kona Litwa, wydaje ostatnie tchnienie Białoruś” (Tadeusz Konwicki, *Mała Apokalipsa* [Warsaw: Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza, 2001], 225). Lourie’s

rendering (“The Ukraine was dying, Lithuania was perishing, Belorussia was breathing its last”) uses the past tense, which diminishes the quality of ongoingness suggested by the present tense of the original. Moreover, the original *kona* is more than merely “perishing” (which would be *ginie* in Polish); and “the Ukraine” may be better translated as “Ukraine,” given the obvious anti-Soviet political orientation of the novel. I have retained the definite article because it corresponds to Ukraine’s historical situation as a Soviet republic and not yet an independent state at the time the novel was written.

2. See Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

3. Walter Benjamin, “Central Park,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938–1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 173.

4. Paul de Man, “Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1983), 209.

5. For a critical account of the ambivalent inscription of the former Soviet sphere into late-capitalist narratives and institutional structures of globalism, see Dan Kalb, “Globalism and Postsocialist Prospects,” in *Postsocialism: Ideals, Ideologies, and Practices in Eurasia*, ed. C. M. Hann (London: Routledge, 2002), 317–34.

6. Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 39.

7. H. D. Harootunian and Masao Miyoshi, “Introduction: The ‘Afterlife’ of Area Studies,” in *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies*, ed. Masao Miyoshi and H. D. Harootunian (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 7.

8. Elsewhere, I have discussed the consequences of this uncritical approach to language and knowledge in the belated attempts by Slavic studies to incorporate “gender” and “women” as either categories of analysis or objects of research. That unpublished paper, entitled “The Timeliness of ‘Gender,’” is reproduced in its entirety in note 61 of this chapter.

9. Paul A. Bové, “Afterword: ‘Global/Local’ Memory and Thought,” in *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, ed. Rob Wilson and Wimal Disssanayake (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 379.

10. Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 4, 14.

11. Konwicki, *Minor Apocalypse*, 129. Translation modified: Lourie renders the last sentence, “Jakby ci wszyscy ludzie czekali na rychłą przeprowadzkę do nowego kraju” (Konwicki, *Minor Apocalypse*, 132), as “As if all the people were expecting to be whisked away to a new country any minute.”

12. *Ibid.*, 82, translation modified to reflect the present tense of the original, instead of Lourie’s “The regime had its own art.”

13. *Ibid.*, 118.

14. From *Philadelphia Inquirer*, promotional blurb on the back cover of Lourie’s English translation.

15. For an example of this kind of reading, see Carl Tighe, “Tadeusz Konwicky’s *A Minor Apocalypse*,” *Modern Language Review* 91, no. 1 (January 1996): 159–74.

16. For the evolution of the concept of allegory, which has been put to different uses and subjected to divergent evaluations at different moments in history, see Jon Whitman, ed., *Interpretation and Allegory: Antiquity to the Modern Period* (Boston: Brill, 2000). The particular charge of its excessive abstraction and artificiality comes most recently from the romantic-era opposition between allegory and symbol (a charge Paul de Man argues against throughout his work).

17. Auerbach, “Figura,” 49.

18. *Ibid.*, 54.

19. On the significance of “Central Park” within the corpus of Benjamin’s work, see Lloyd Spencer, “Allegory in the World of the Commodity: The Importance of Central Park,” *New German Critique* 34 (Winter 1985): 59–77.

20. Benjamin, “Central Park,” 169.

21. *Ibid.*, 164.

22. *Ibid.*, 169.

23. *Ibid.*, 179.

24. For a more extended discussion of national allegory and Fredric Jameson’s well-known essay on the subject, “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” see chapter 4 in this book.

25. Konwicky, *Minor Apocalypse*, 13.

26. *Ibid.*, 24.

27. *Ibid.*, 171.

28. *Ibid.*, 182.

29. *Ibid.*, 52. Translation modified. Lourie’s translation (“But if the world isn’t dying, then you have to live somehow. You need to have a human death”) distorts the original so that it appears to be concerned with individual human existences (“you have to live somehow” instead of *the world* needing to live off something; and “a human death,” such as the one sacrifice the protagonist is obliged to make, as opposed to human death *as such*). See “Wielu już pokoleniom zdawało się, że świat umiera. Ale to tylko ich własny świat umierał. –Lecz jeśli świat nie umiera, to musi z czegoś żyć. Potrzebuje człowieczej śmierci” (Konwicky, *Mała Apokalipsa*, 54–55).

30. Konwicky, *Minor Apocalypse*, 58.

31. *Ibid.*, 226, translation modified. In the original: “Przedemną szli tą samą ścieżką na stos buddyjscy mnisi, pewien Czech, jacyś Litwini” (229). Lourie’s translation (“A certain Czech and a Lithuanian had preceded me on this path which led to a Buddhist monk’s pyre”) inexplicably changes the plural *Lithuanians* into a *Lithuanian* and erases the self-immolation of Buddhist monks as one instance among many, turning “Buddhist” into a mere modifier of the pyre.

32. *Ibid.*, 111–12.

33. Lourie renders “To wszystko takie dwuznaczne” as “There’s something ambivalent about the whole thing.”

34. Costica Bradatan and Serguei Alex Oushakine, introduction to *In Marx's Shadow: Knowledge, Power, and Intellectuals in Eastern Europe and Russia*, ed. Costica Bradatan and Serguei Alex Oushakine (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 2.

35. Miglena Nikolchina, "The Seminar: Mode d'emploi: Impure Spaces in the Light of Late Totalitarianism," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 97.

36. Václav Havel, "On Evasive Thinking," in *Open Letters: Selected Writings: 1965–1990*, ed. and trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Random House, 1992), 12. For an example of the consequences of such primacy of word over reality in everyday life, see Péter Nádas, "A Tale of Fire and Knowledge," in *Fire and Knowledge: Fiction and Essays*, trans. Imre Goldstein (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 268–75. For a useful discussion of Havel's and other Eastern European intellectuals' thinking about the differences between totalitarian and ordinary language, see Veronika Tuckerová's "The Totalitarian Languages of Utopia and Dystopia: Fidelius and Havel," in Bradatan and Oushakine, *In Marx's Shadow*, 95–109.

37. This mechanism—by way of which the gap between language and referent becomes exposed the more they are made to coincide—may be said to lie at the basis of the late socialist Slovenian avant-garde collective NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst) and its music group Laibach, who exploit it in their critique of totalitarianism by calling for more, not less, alienation that would come about through ever more seamless identification with the political regime. As Alexei Monroe explains, their "process of disintegrative overidentification entails manifesting problematic elements in distorted and overamplified forms in order to escape them" (see Alexei Monroe, *Interrogation Machine: Laibach and NSK* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005], 45). Another late socialist critical mode deploying overidentification is the Russian *stiob*—a mode of parody that inhabits its target so well that it is difficult to distinguish the parody from the original. Dominic Boyer and Alexei Yurchak have observed a similar mechanism at work in late capitalist parody, with the Yes Men and the *Onion* as prime examples; see Boyer and Yurchak, "American *Stiob*: Or, What Late-Socialist Aesthetics of Parody Reveal about Contemporary Political Culture in the West," *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (2010): 179–221. Significantly for my argument in this chapter, this points to the recognition that a corruption of language similar to that exposed in Konwicki's novel afflicts the former First World. The difference between the First and the Second World is that in the latter human agency is visibly at work in manipulating language, while in the former this agency is disavowed. To put it differently, it is not the case that, on the one hand, in the First World language has an unbroken relation to veracity and referentiality while truth is always speakable and that, on the other hand, in the Second World this relation is broken. It is not the case that the West can stand as a guarantee of the possibility of truth *somewhere*. The difference between the two worlds lies instead in the way each conceives of its own capacity for truthful language and how each represents itself in relation to its opposite.

38. Konwicki, *Minor Apocalypse*, 49.

39. *Ibid.*, 50.

40. Translation modified. Lourie renders “ciągle jeszcze mrocznym, połyskującym wygasłym fanatyzmem” as “dark and glittering with the embers of fanaticism” (46).

41. *Ibid.*, 194–95.

42. Translation modified. Lourie renders “Bo gdybyś używał znaków przestankowych, to może nie trzeba by było w tym kraju umierać na pokaz” as “If you used punctuation, then maybe we wouldn’t need show deaths in this country” (21).

43. *Ibid.*, 35, translation modified.

44. *Ibid.*, 123 (my emphasis).

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*, 124.

47. The ideological presumption of the existence of organic, undistorted time, with the West as its principal site, is perhaps what underlies the very notion of backwardness as a condition of lagging behind the norm while also tending toward it. In a marked departure from this presumption, Katherine Verdery argues that “the fall of socialism lies not simply in the intersection of two systems’ [i.e., capitalist and socialist] temporal cycles but rather in the collision of two differently constituted temporal orders, together with the notions of person and activity proper to them” (*What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996], 37). This insight was missing from the processes of transition that followed, which did indeed treat capitalist temporality and its attendant notions of person and activity as natural and the recently discredited socialist notions as deformations; see, for instance, Elizabeth C. Dunn, *Privatizing Poland: Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

48. Verdery, *What Was Socialism*, 37.

49. See Paul de Man, “The Concept of Irony,” in *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 163–84.

50. De Man, “Rhetoric of Temporality,” 214.

51. De Man, “Rhetoric of Temporality,” 211.

52. Konwicki, *Minor Apocalypse*, 16.

53. Jacques Derrida, “Psyche: Inventions of the Other,” in *Reading de Man Reading*, ed. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 51.

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*, 53.

56. Brown, *Edgework*, 14.

57. See Michael Burawoy, “Afterword,” in *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*, ed. Michael Burawoy and Katherine Verdery (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 301–12.

58. See Wlad Godzich, “Emergent Literature and the Field of Comparative Literature,” in *The Culture of Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 274–92.

59. See, for instance, *Over the Wall/After the Fall: Post-Communist Cultures through an East-West Gaze*, edited by Sibelan Forrester, Magdalena

Zaborowska, and Elena Gapova (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2004).

60. The professional organization of Slavic studies scholars took nearly two additional decades to address the new work on these issues. The theme “The Gender Question” at the 2008 convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (which in 2010 became the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies) was framed, paradoxically, as both a long-overdue assessment and a confrontation with a historically novel object.

61. Here is an extended version of my argument about the inclusion of gender, as a new area of research, in the purview of Slavic studies. The short piece below, entitled “The Timeliness of ‘Gender,’” was given in 2008 at the “Gendering Historiography” panel of the AAASS (now ASEEE) annual convention. It is included here in mostly unchanged form in order to preserve its occasional aspect and its own proper context—which is appropriate for a piece (and a chapter) that focuses on timeliness. Even as it appears to stand apart from the body of the book, the paper shows some further implications and applications of my book’s broader theoretical insights. Including it here instead of integrating it into the text also opens to view the necessarily fragmented aspect of interdisciplinary work, which—in addressing itself to multiple audiences and disciplinary formations at once—achieves the appearance of smooth form only by erasing its constitutive brokenness.

THE TIMELINESS OF “GENDER”

The question of gender in Slavic studies is marked by a simultaneous timeliness and belatedness. In one view, the present moment is the right time to incorporate gender analysis into the disciplinary mainstream, and the new work on women’s social, political, and economic situation resulting from the post-Soviet transition to capitalism could not be timelier. If what is at stake in the transition itself is progress, then women’s situation in the region must be attended to; the status of women has long served as an index of modernization in general—from the Bolshevik revolution, to the Cold War “Women in Development” regime, to the recent clash-of-civilizations rhetoric. For Kofi Annan, the fate of the world rests on the fate of women: “There is no time to lose if we are to reach the Millennium Development Goals by the target date of 2015,” he said in 2003. “Only by investing in the world’s women can we expect to get there.” This historical exigency more than justifies the flurry of studies by Slavists in sociology, anthropology, political science, and other fields since the early ’90s. And the relatively new research on women in history and literary history provides a longer view, beyond the past two decades (e.g., Pamela Chester and Sibelan Forrester’s 1996 volume *Engendering Slavic Literatures*, and Celia Hawkesworth’s 2001 *A History of Central European Women’s Writing*). This synchronicity between the emergence of women’s problems in the newly postsocialist region and the emergence of scholarship on women in Slavic studies could not appear more natural: Slavic studies is simply keeping with the times, attending to new objects of study as they become manifest—with only the slightest of delays.

Timely as it is, however, this work is also overdue and takes place under the sign of a belated awakening. In finally doing justice to women and redressing the past neglect, Slavic studies finds a promise of its own disciplinary progress as well. The question of gender in Slavic studies, then, is a matter of inclusion on several surprisingly related registers: the socioeconomic inclusion of women in the post-Soviet democracies, the inclusion of the former Soviet sphere into Western institutions and

communities of the present, and finally the inclusion of Slavic studies in the broader scholarly community in the United States. Yet this moment affords not only a chance for progress in all these registers, empirical as well as epistemological; perhaps antithetically to any simple notion of progress, it affords a chance for critical reflection—one that does not attempt only to redress neglect, lack, and lag. The theme of this conference, “The Gender Question,” prompts the questions: What might the adoption of gender as an analytical category do for Slavic studies? What might be the promises and the limits of this adoption? Will it simply complete the picture and fill a gap, or might it provoke a productive disciplinary rupture?

When “the gender question” is read in this way, we recognize it as a very old question—it comes to echo the problems already familiar to us from feminist challenges to a host of disciplines in the United States. More than twenty years ago, for example, in *Gender and the Politics of History*, Joan Scott noted the frustrating inefficacy of doing women’s history. “By uncovering new information about women,” she wrote, “historians assumed they would right the balance of long years of neglect. But what amounted to an almost naïve endorsement of positivism soon led to a critique of it. New facts might document the existence of women in the past, but they did not necessarily change the importance (or lack of it) attributed to women’s activities. Indeed, the separate treatment of women could serve to confirm their marginal relationship to those (male) subjects already established as dominant and universal. Associated with the initial acceptance of history’s positivism was an implicit belief in pluralism, in the possibility of expanding existing categories and topics to include women”(3).

While research on women’s lives is necessary, such work of redress sooner or later encounters a limit: it is all too easy to consign women’s history to a separate, supplementary status, which leaves intact dominant categories.

This realization has led to the consensus across disciplines that “a more radical feminist politics (and a more radical feminist history) seemsto require a more radical epistemology” (*Gender and the Politics of History*, 4). In legal studies and international relations, through the work of Hilary Charlesworth and Ann Tickner, for example, the attempt to account for women led to a similar realization that a more radical questioning of the foundations of knowledge was needed. And scholars in literary studies, such as Ellen Rooney, have reached a similar conclusion: “that systemic exclusions are not easily repaired by a simple additive approach, by the ‘inclusion’ of once marginalized women and communities in a renovated totalization” (*Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, 3).

If the general claim that disciplines are themselves knowledge-producing forms is not inherently or solely feminist, this is precisely what may be said to unite the otherwise disparate feminist scholarship across disciplines: the idea that work on women does not automatically lead to a challenge of the very categories of knowledge that maintain gender-based subordination; that something more is needed—attention to the politics of knowledge production. Following Scott’s example, this “something more” of feminist scholarship entails making women’s presence permanently visible and requires a certain detachment from the immediacy of documenting their lives and contributions. Crucially, it involves questioning the positivist conception of knowledge, in which knowledge and the object of knowledge coincide—in which the parameters of inquiry are delimited by the object of inquiry. The feminist predicament, in contrast—the fact that work on women inevitably encounters a limit—makes visible the noncoincidence between world and language, or between world and the knowledge we produce about it.

On second thought, however, this may not be the literal or intended meaning of “The Gender Question.” It may even be presumptuous to infer a feminist intent (or a feminist politics) in the conference theme. Because the Gender Question also

recalls the histories of the Woman Question and the Jewish Question, it is not an open question. If it takes up the problem of emancipation, it turns quickly to the problem of assimilating, regulating, and managing a potentially disruptive presence. The emerging modern nation-state in the nineteenth century was confronted with women's claims to equality and with Jewish cultural and religious difference. In *Regulating Aversion*, Wendy Brown has shown that both questions were resolved with a focus on maintaining the coherence of the liberal state, rather than on enabling these constituencies' full emancipation. Even more relevant for our context is that the need to address these questions arose only in response to a demand that had to be neutralized and in reaction to a presence that had to be assimilated. As with the Polish Question—another nineteenth-century problem, this one prompted by repeated uprisings—it was a matter of confronting what had in any case come to call attention to itself and what could no longer be avoided.

On this second reading, the Gender Question in Slavic studies—and the new work that the question has prompted—is dictated, or even forced, by a new reality. I want to question the apparent naturalness and neutrality of this coincidence, and the tempting conclusion that this new knowledge responds to the new historical reality in a satisfactory (because prompt) way. I want to suggest that the positivist conception of knowledge—which reassures us that this is only natural—stands in the way of a feminist scholarship committed to emancipation and to a lasting political change. If the experience of scholarship on women across disciplines proves that positivism is not easily overcome, then Slavic studies is especially resistant to such critique. As area studies, it necessarily conceives of itself as a data-gathering observer and a transparent conduit of information. Self-reflection on the politics of knowledge production is all the more challenging here, because it troubles this model and threatens to interfere with the unproblematic transmission of knowledge—even as this is precisely what a feminist politics requires.

It may be problematic to consider Slavic studies as a unified field, but the call for papers for this convention must be one place where a coherent voice might be heard—and so I read a fragment: “Almost a century ago the young Soviet state declared women emancipated and professionally equal to men. Despite or perhaps because of this official stance, women's studies and attention to gender emerged comparatively late in scholarship on our region.” In this statement, the hesitant yet pronounced conjunction “despite or perhaps because” attempts to account for the relation between the Slavic world itself and the knowledge that Slavic studies has produced about it. But “despite or perhaps because” is, on close inspection, untenable and contradictory; we can admit only part of it at a time. And so, if we focus on “despite,” we would be led to understand that Slavic studies should have paid attention to women because they were emancipated and deserved such attention. Or, on the contrary, maybe the discipline should have paid attention because it should have known better and should have seen through official discourse. If, on the other hand, we privilege the “perhaps because,” we would be led to understand that, because women were in fact officially emancipated, Slavic studies did not need to consider them as distinct objects of study. Any way we read it, the statement confesses to a failure to apprehend the object of study—whether it is women, gender relations, or the region as a whole—adequately.

How could a strict and dutiful fidelity to developments on the ground, so characteristic of area studies, have produced such a misapprehension? How could the disciplinary ethos of keeping with the times have failed to grasp the times? The matter-of-fact statement conceals the fact that it doesn't know the answer.

Of course, neither this rhetorical slip nor the belated attention to gender is in itself catastrophic. But I think it marks an opening toward a methodological

renewal. So far, there has been one other occasion for a productive disciplinary crisis—when the dissolution of the Soviet Union put the territorial and geopolitical integrity of the object of Slavic studies into question. The critical energies directed at that crisis were focused on reimagining—or perhaps merely reconstituting—that object by attempting to find new names for it: postsocialism, Eurasia, Newly Independent States. Attention to gender may provoke another such crisis, and more profound. Gendering historiography—or any other mode of inquiry more or less rooted in positivism—means following the lessons learned by the feminist scholars I mentioned at the beginning: that gendered power relations may not be objectively visible and that combating gender subordination requires a vigilant questioning of the foundations and the politics of knowledge. Posing the gender question forces attention to language and reminds us that scholarly knowledge is neither transparent nor neutral. It also reminds us that historical newness is something distinct from epistemological newness—that, in other words, research on women’s lives does not necessarily affect dominant narratives.

There is an affinity between feminist critique and the mode of knowledge we call literature. Because, as literary theorist Paul de Man writes, literature “knows and names itself as fiction,” it announces its separation from reality from the start; it alone maintains the fact of the separation between sign and meaning in plain view. It is “the only form of language free from the fallacy of unmediated expression.” The paradoxical temporality of the gender question in Slavic studies—failing to grasp the times despite having kept a close watch over history—has, perhaps momentarily, put in plain view the existence of a similar separation of disciplinary knowledge from reality. Taking this insight seriously may encourage a kind of scholarly inquiry that would be more interested in reflecting on itself, and more flexible in imagining alternative methodologies. It would encourage, to turn to Wendy Brown’s words, “both close attunement to the times and aggressive violation of their self-conception” (*Edgework*, 14).

62. For the stakes and internal debates attending the introduction of “Eurasia” as a new paradigm in history, see Mark von Hagen’s “Empires, Borderlands, and Diasporas: Eurasia as Anti-paradigm for the Post-Soviet Era,” *American Historical Review* 109, no. 2 (April 2004): 445–68. Similar debates, across disciplines, attend every other term proposed as an alternative (post-communism, postsocialism, Newly Independent States, Central Asia, Central Europe, New Europe). Each asserts a different coherence and privileges different historical lineage and connections.

63. In the United States, two opening salvos of the debates over the postcolonial status of the former Second World will be found in David Chioni Moore’s “Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique,” *PMLA* 116, no. 1 (January 2001): 111–28; and Clare Cavanaugh’s “Postcolonial Poland,” in *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 1 (2004): 82–92. The “Are We Postcolonial? Post-Soviet Space” MLA Forum broadened the audience for this question (see Conference Debates, *PMLA* 121, no. 3 [2005]: 828–36), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak returned to it in “1994: Will Postcolonialism Travel?,” in *Other Asias* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 97–131. For a useful overview of these debates in parts of the region, see Dirk Uffelmann, “Theory as Memory Practice: The Divided Discourse on Poland’s Postcoloniality,” in *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe*, ed. Uilleam Blacker, Alexander Etkind, and Julie Fedor (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013),

103–24. For some explicit considerations of the intersections between post-coloniality and postsocialism, see Dorota Kołodziejczyk and Cristina Şandru, eds., “On Colonialism, Communism, and East-Central Europe,” special issue, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48, no. 2, (2012), especially the introduction by the editors and Madina Tlostanova’s “Postsocialist ≠ Postcolonial? On Post-Soviet Imaginary and Global Coloniality” in the same volume, 113–16 and 130–42 respectively. Further exemplary studies of this intersection include Janusz Korek, ed., *From Sovietology to Postcoloniality: Poland and Ukraine from a Postcolonial Perspective*, Södertörn Academic Studies 32 (Huddinge, Sweden: Södertörns högskola, 2007); Anikó Imre, “Postcolonial Media Studies in Postsocialist Europe,” in Godzich and Starosta, “Second-Hand Europe,” 113–34; and Nataša Kovačević, *Narrating Post/Communism: Colonial Discourse and Europe’s Borderline Civilization* (London: Routledge, 2008).

64. Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery, “Thinking between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism, and Ethnography after the Cold War,” in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51, no. 1 (2009): 11.

65. Hann, *Postsocialism*, 1.

66. For such productive instances of borrowings from postcolonial studies that resulted in new, previously unasked research questions that until then may have been blocked from view by more traditional nation-based historiographies and literary histories, see Izabela Kalinowska’s *Between East and West: Polish and Russian Nineteenth-Century Travel to the Orient* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2004); Ewa Thompson’s *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000); or Kristin Kopp’s *Germany’s Wild East: Constructing Poland as Colonial Space* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012).

67. In a relatively early piece, Katherine Verdery (“Whither Postsocialism?”) argues for a deliberate following of postcolonialism in developing postsocialist research agendas. See “Whither Postsocialism?” in Hann, *Postsocialism*, 15–21.

CHAPTER 2

1. Rodolphe Gasché, *Europe, or The Infinite Task: A Study of a Philosophical Concept* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 7.

2. “Eastern Europe” too is unstable in its boundaries, but in a different way from “Europe”—the former is a shifting signifier of difference *from* the latter. For an illuminating discussion of how these two instabilities encounter each other and interact, see Starosta, “Imagine an Albanian Joyce.”

3. Anthony Pagden, *The Idea of Europe: From Antiquity to the European Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 33.

4. Umberto Eco, “An Uncertain Europe between Rebirth and Decline,” in *Old Europe, New Europe, Core Europe*, ed. Daniel Levy, Max Pensky, and John Torpey (London: Verso, 2005), 16.

5. For an analysis of how colonial legacies operate in the context of contemporary Latvia’s negotiations of its Europeanness, see Dace Dzenovska,

“Historical Agency and the Coloniality of Power in Postsocialist Europe,” *Anthropological Theory* 13, no. 4 (2013): 394–416.

6. Marc Crépon, *Altérités de l'Europe* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2006), 59. My translation.

7. Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 12–13.

8. *Ibid.*, 26.

9. *Ibid.*, 9.

10. *Ibid.*, 5.

11. Crépon, *Altérités*, 72–73, my translation.

12. See Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*; Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*; and Kristin Kopp, *Germany's Wild East: Constructing Poland as Colonial Space* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012). These three works, taken together, provide a complex analysis of these overlapping colonial histories and effects.

13. Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005); Ewa Thompson echoes this thesis in “Ways of Remembering: The Case of Poland,” *Toronto Slavic Quarterly* 12 (Spring 2005): 1–14.

14. In a critique of this evolutionary paradigm, which depends on the language of precedence and derivativeness, Maria Todorova considers “the relative synchronicity of eastern and western Europe within a *longue durée* framework, a perspective that circumvents the trap of origins, which carries backwardness as its corollary.” See “The Trap of Backwardness,” *Slavic Review* 64, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 140–64.

15. “Borderlands: Ethnicity, Identity, and Violence in the Shatter-Zone of Empires since 1848,” research project, Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University, 2003–7, www.watsoninstitute.org/borderlands. Robert Kaplan’s *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2005) is another example.

16. Anikó Imre, “Whiteness in Post-socialist Eastern Europe: The Time of the Gypsies, the End of the Race,” in *Postcolonial Whiteness: A Critical Reader on Race and Empire*, ed. Alfred J. López (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 81.

17. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 27, 7.

18. Crépon, *Altérités*, 73–74 (my translation).

19. All statements cited here have been translated and collected in Levy, Pensky, and Torpey, *Old Europe*. The volume also contains responses from Eastern European intellectuals, who were not invited to the original exchange.

20. *Ibid.*, 5.

21. *Ibid.*, 8. In the “Letter of Eight,” a significant number of Western European states also announced their plans to side with the United States. Although the letter was signed by Spain, Italy, Denmark, Portugal, and the United Kingdom alongside Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic—and thus mostly by

Western European states—it provoked disproportionate displeasure against the three Eastern European signatories, which at the time were candidates for accession into the European Union. In a context different from the exchange initiated by Habermas and Derrida, but directing his rebuke even more explicitly at the EU candidate countries among the signatories, Jacques Chirac said: “Being a member of the European Union requires a minimum of consideration for the others. If on the first issue you start giving your point of view irrespective of any consultation with the entity you want to join, then that isn’t very responsible behaviour. At any event, it’s not very good manners. They have missed a good opportunity to remain silent. Quite apart from the not-being-nice or childish aspect of that initiative, it’s dangerous.” Jacques Chirac, press conference given by Embassy of France in the United States, February 20, 2003, quoted in Antje Wiener, “Contested Compliance: Interventions on the Normative Structure of World Politics,” *European Journal of International Relations* 10 (2004): 209.

22. Quoted in Levy, Pensky, and Torpey, *Old Europe*, 16.

23. *Ibid.*, 12.

24. *Ibid.*, 9.

25. Kapuściński’s books of reportage include *The Emperor: Downfall of an Autocrat*, trans. William Brand and Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand (New York: Vintage, 1989), about the fall of Haile Selassie of Ethiopia; *Shah of Shahs*, trans. William Brand and Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand (New York: Vintage, 1992), about the last Iranian shah; *Another Day of Life*, trans. William Brand and Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand (New York: Vintage, 2001), about the revolution in Angola in the late 1960s; *The Soccer War*, trans. William Brand (New York: Vintage, 1992), about a war in Central America; and *Imperium*, trans. Klara Glowczewska (New York: Vintage, 1995), covering the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

26. Ryszard Kapuściński, *The Other* (London: Verso, 2009), 9.

27. *Ibid.*, 13

28. *Ibid.*, my emphases, 74.

29. *Ibid.*, 57.

30. Ryszard Kapuściński, *The Shadow of the Sun*, trans. Klara Glowczewska (New York: Knopf, 2001), 39.

31. *Ibid.*, 40 (emphasis mine).

32. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markman (New York: Grove, 1967), 112. Kapuściński does not make explicit reference to Fanon in his nearly exact quotation, but it would have been impossible for him *not* to have at least heard of him in his extensive travels through decolonizing, and later postcolonial, Africa.

33. Kapuściński, *Shadow of the Sun*, 40–41.

34. Kapuściński, *Other*, 36–37 (my emphasis).

35. Gasché, *Europe*, 7.

36. Ironically, Kapuściński’s Europeanness figures as eminently believable in a recent work on the discursive construction of *Southern Europe* as backward and thus excluded from the rest of Europe. From *this* outside position,

Kapuściński's discourse appears exemplary of Europe's own, when he is quoted praising European "inventiveness and creativity, democracy, liberty, critical sense and tolerance, and respect of other cultures." See Roberto Maria Dainotto, *Europe (in Theory)* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 4.

37. Neal Ascherson, introduction to *The Other*, by Ryszard Kapuściński, translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones (London: Verso, 2009), 9. The most "shocking" events Kapuściński did witness in his country involved the Nazi and Soviet invasions of Poland, the latter of which he witnessed as a child growing up in Eastern Poland. This prompts the question of whether organized aggression of two states against another still counts as communal violence—not to mention the question of whether it is accurate to describe in these terms the violence of decolonization struggles and dictatorships that he reported on. See Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001) for a refutation of the tribalist account of violent conflict in Africa. The Eastern European case may still be awaiting a similar defense, but Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans* provides a useful argument against the notion of the region's nationalisms as inherently violent.

38. Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 166.

39. Witold Gombrowicz, *Diary*, trans. Lillian Vallee (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 275.

40. Henryk Sienkiewicz, *W pustyni i w puszczy* (Warsaw: Prószyński i S-ka, 2003), 22. All translations from this novel are my own. Readers wishing to consult the English translation will find it in *In Desert and Wilderness*, trans. Mirosław Lipiński (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1994).

41. *Ibid.*, 83.

42. *Ibid.*, 17–18.

43. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 50.

44. Sienkiewicz, *W pustyni*, 386.

45. *Ibid.*, 388.

46. *Ibid.*, 136.

47. *Ibid.*, 286.

48. *Ibid.*, 344.

49. *Ibid.*, 345.

50. *Ibid.*, 258, 260.

51. József Böröcz has noted a similar mechanism of "appropriating" or "acceding to" whiteness and Westernness in the context of the EU enlargement: "The central and east European applicants' current desire for EU membership ends up producing an implicit and un-articulated nostalgia for the contemporary advantages and identity designs originating in somebody else's colonial-imperial past" (József Böröcz and Melinda Kovács, eds., *The Empire's New Clothes: Unveiling EU Enlargement* [Central Europe Review E-Book, 2001], 30). But Eastern Europeans' current desire for the identity benefits accrued by Western Europe (benefits that have not been given up along with colonialism

itself—that is, in the postcolonial context, the colonially constructed Western European identity remains in place) is not expressed as an explicit desire for “whiteness” as such. Whiteness as a value becomes operative and desirable only in a context such as colonial Africa in Sienkiewicz.

52. Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 2.

53. Sienkiewicz, *W pustyni*, 393.

54. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 3.

55. Sienkiewicz, *W pustyni*, 353.

56. Jacqueline Rose, *States of Fantasy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3.

57. Homi Bhabha, “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism,” in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 76.

58. *In Desert and Wilderness* serves primarily as an example of good behavior and traditional Polish virtues. As Anna Klobucka writes, in 1990 the Ministry of National Education included the novel in obligatory readings for the fifth grade. “This official postcommunist endorsement interestingly mirrors some of the novel’s early critical appreciations, which stressed its national pedagogical dimension and elevated it to the status of essential reading for young Polish citizens-in-the-making.” Anna Klobucka, “*Desert and Wilderness* Revisited: Sienkiewicz’s Africa in the Polish National Imagination,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 45, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 247.

59. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, 283.

60. Erica Johnson Debeljak, “Five Little Negroes and Other Songs: A Lesson in Political Correctness from the Former Yugoslavia,” *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 105–18.

61. Liga Morska i Kolonialna, 1930–39, Tadeusz Białas, and Kolonie Rzeczypospolitej, Marek Kowalski.

62. Quoted in Grażyna Borkowska, “Polskie doświadczenie kolonialne,” *Teksty Drugie* 4 (2007): 15–24.

63. Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *The Uncanny*, trans. David McClintock (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 124, 134.

CHAPTER 3

1. Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record* (Marlboro, VT: Marlboro Press, 1988), 9.

2. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 9.

3. Paul de Man, “Reading and History,” in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1986), 67.

4. De Man, “Semiology and Rhetoric,” in *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 10.

5. These cultural binaries appear differently in Conrad's time and in his own discourse, where Eastern and Western Europe figure, rather, as the Asiatic despotism of Russia as contrasted with the West. In commentaries about Conrad's origins in his lifetime, the novelty of his writing was attributed to his foreignness and to the "Slavonic"—that is, Russian—influences. Conrad labored to dissociate himself and his place of origin from "Slavonism," speaking of partitioned Poland—in terms reminiscent of the 1980s attempts by Kundera and others to define "Central Europe" as a "kidnapped" West—as a properly Western country unjustly abandoned by the West. As he writes in a 1924 letter: "What is personal has been put to the account of racial affinities. The critics detected in me a new note and, as they had discovered the existence of Russian authors, they stuck that label on me under the name of Slavonism. It would have been more just to charge me at most with 'Polonism.' Polish temperament is far removed from Byzantine and Asiatic associations. So much for my heredity. As for influences, I must point out that I do not know the Russian language, that I know next to nothing of Russian imaginative literature, that the formative forces acting on me were purely Western: that is French and English; and that, as far as I remember, those forces found in me no resistance, no vague, deep-seated antagonism, either racial or temperamental" (*The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 8, ed. Laurence Davies and Gene M. Moore [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008], 290–91). The "long silences" of Conrad's childhood—which point to historical and political, rather than cultural or "racial," determinations of his later writing—are thus a way of articulating the connection between his writing and his origins without asserting an essential Polishness that might be speaking through him.

6. On this question, see, for example, Jonathan Culler and Pheng Cheah, eds., *Grounds of Comparison: Around the Work of Benedict Anderson* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

7. De Man, "Reading and History," 68.

8. The meaning of *Homo duplex* would have been familiar to Conrad's contemporaries from Émile Durkheim's theorization of the duality between nature and culture, or instinct and consciousness.

9. See Frederick Robert Karl, *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1979).

10. F. R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition* (1948) placed Conrad firmly in the English literary heritage, and, in a surprising recent echo of this gesture, Rebecca Walkowitz affirms Conrad's "Britishness"—as a trait linked to his cosmopolitanism, so that "Conrad is exemplary as a British writer" and "develops naturalness as a characteristic of British culture." See *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 38.

11. The small corpus of Conrad's works dealing explicitly with Poland or Russia consists of the stories "Amy Foster," "Prince Roman," and "The Warrior's Soul"; the novel *Under Western Eyes*; the autobiography *A Personal Record*; and the essays "Autocracy and War," "A Note on the Polish Problem," "Poland Revisited," and "The Crime of Partition" (in Joseph Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters*), 71–93, 108–13, 114–37, and 94–107, respectively.

12. Terry Collits, *Postcolonial Conrad: Paradoxes of Empire* (London: Routledge, 2005), 12.

13. Melas, *All the Difference*, 81.

14. Michael Valdez Moses, *The Novel and the Globalization of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 68.

15. This, for Moses, accounts for the bipartite structure of *Lord Jim*. Moses's conception of both Patusan and Conrad's native Poland as places outside modernity, however, must be read with caution. Patusan and Poland were not "backwater[s] of world history" (*ibid.*, 74)—they were its logical consequences. Patusan is not free from capitalist conflict, and Poland's peripheral position is not the result of its absence from "world history," but the reverse—a direct result of its presence in it.

16. Stefan Zabierowski (*Conrad w perspektywie odbioru: Szkice* [Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1979]), Zdzisław Najder (*Conrad in Perspective: Essays on Art and Fidelity* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997]), and Adam Gillon ("Conrad in Poland," *Polish Review* 19, nos. 3–4 [1974]: 3–28) have authoritatively explored Conrad's Polish reception and influence. For additional illuminating discussions, see also Amar Acheraiou's "Polish Responses: Art and the Ethics of Collectivity" and "British Reception: Englishness and the Act of Reading," both in *Joseph Conrad and the Reader* (25–48 and 49–66 respectively).

17. Alex Kurczaba, introduction to *Conrad and Poland*, ed. Alex Kurczaba (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs; Lublin: Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin, 1996), 6.

18. Najder, "Introduction, or Confession of a Mastodon," in *Conrad in Perspective*, 9. For further work on Conrad's Polish background, see Wiesław Krajka, *From Szlachta Culture to the 21st Century, Between East and West: New Essays on Joseph Conrad's Polishness*, East European Monographs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

19. Edward Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 58.

20. Andrea White, "Writing from Within: Autobiography and Immigrant Subjectivity in *The Mirror of the Sea*," in *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Carola Kaplan, Peter Mallios, and Andrea White (New York: Routledge, 2005), 242.

21. Conrad to J. B. Pinker, quoted in Christopher GoGwilt, *The Invention of the West: Joseph Conrad and the Double-Mapping of Europe and Empire* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 132; Conrad, *Personal Record*, 10.

22. Joseph Conrad, *Notes on My Books* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1921).

23. White, "Writing from Within," 242.

24. Fredric Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism," in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*, ed. Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and Edward Said (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 51.

25. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 188.

26. Melas, *All the Difference*, 59.

27. This unwitting effect of postcolonial literary criticism is reflected in postcolonial theory more broadly, as Anne McClintock, among others, has noted. See Anne McClintock, "Postcolonialism and the Angel of Progress," in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 1–17.

28. See, for example, Bernheimer, *Comparative Literature*; Saussy, *Comparative Literature*; and Christopher Prendergast, ed., *Debating World Literature* (London: Verso, 2004).

29. Françoise Meltzer, "Rupture and the Limits of Reading," *Romanic Review* 93, nos. 1–2 (2003): 63.

30. Another way to put this may be through David Damrosch's observation that works of literature tend to fall into three general categories: classics, masterpieces, and windows on the world. While any single work may be classified as belonging to one, two, or all of these categories, the newest entrants to the world-literary scene are read primarily as windows on the world (*What Is World Literature?*).

31. Réda Bensmaïa, *Experimental Nations or, the Invention of the Maghreb*, trans. Alyson Waters (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 6.

32. Especially in *Death of a Discipline*, where she writes, for example: "We should not read [peripheral literature] with foregone conclusions that deny it literariness" (58) and "I am reading the logic of the rhetoric, not the text as cultural information" (61), and, to cite one more instance, "I have suggested that literary studies must take the 'figure' as its guide. All around us is the clamor for the rational destruction of the figure, the demand not for clarity but immediate comprehensibility by the ideological average" (71).

33. See Homi Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817," in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 102–22, for ways in which English particularity becomes translated into a universal in the British colonial setting.

34. Rushdie, "'Commonwealth Literature,'" 66.

35. Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004) has examined the complex processes through which writers receive recognition and intelligibility within the international space: prizes, reviews, translations, etc. I will return to the problem of reading in the next chapter.

36. Conrad, *Notes on My Books*, 20.

37. De Man, "Reading and History," 55–56.

38. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 53. In an essay on Conrad's authorship, Amar Acheraïou notes a difference: "Unlike Barthes, who considers the writer dead or exiled from his fictional universe, Conrad argues rather that the author only melts away and disseminates," but in light of my discussion above, Barthes and Conrad share a concern with opening reading more than they differ. See Amar Acheraïou, "Conrad's Conception of Authorship: Probing the Implications and Limits of

the Death-of-the-Author Theory,” in *Joseph Conrad and the Reader: Questioning Modern Theories of Narrative and Readership* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 18.

39. Gérard Genette, “Introduction to the Paratext,” trans. Marie Maclean, *New Literary History* 22 (1991): 261–62.

40. Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1953), 12–13.

41. Conrad, *Notes on My Books*, 6.

42. *Ibid.*, 4.

43. Conrad, *Personal Record*, 3.

44. Najder, *Conrad in Perspective*, 103.

45. Conrad, *Personal Record*, 9.

46. Barthes, “Death of the Author,” 50.

47. Meltzer, “Rupture,” 61.

48. Paul de Man, “The Concept of Irony,” in *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 178–79.

49. *Ibid.*, 169.

50. *Ibid.*, 181.

51. Conrad, *Personal Record*, 1–2, my emphasis. Conrad’s “written accent” has, actually, been studied from the point of view of linguistics, in the effort to trace his stylistic and grammatical idiosyncrasies to the influence of Polish syntax. See Mary Morzinski, “Polish Influence on Conrad’s Style,” in Kurczaba, *Conrad and Poland*, 153–78. I have since returned to this moment in Conrad’s writing in Starosta, “Accented Criticism: Translation and Global Humanities,” *boundary 2* 40, no. 3 (2013): 163–79.

52. See Keith Carabine for the main lines of inquiry concerning this novel, and the commonly acknowledged difficulties in its interpretation, in “*Under Western Eyes*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*, ed. J. H. Stape (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 122–39.

53. Joseph Conrad to Edward Garnett, in *The Selected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, ed. Laurence Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 290.

54. Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes* (New York: Random House, 2001), xx. Najder defends Conrad from the label of “Russophobe” by pointing out that many of the Russian characters in *Under Western Eyes*, in “Heart of Darkness,” and in “The Warrior’s Soul” are portrayed sympathetically (“Conrad, Russia, and Dostoevsky,” in *Conrad in Perspective*, 119–38).

55. Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, 5.

56. *Ibid.*, 20.

57. *Ibid.*, 21.

58. *Ibid.*, 10.

59. *Ibid.*, 50.

60. *Ibid.*, 51.

61. *Ibid.*, 224.

62. *Ibid.*, 39.

63. As Carola Kaplan observes, the barrier between East and West set up in the novel does not affect the characters' physical mobility across actual borders; they are free to travel to and from Russia. But the barrier I am pointing out consists not of literal, physical borders but of political values and historical experiences presented as incompatible. This barrier, which blocks the very possibility of understanding, is precisely the object of the teacher's translation. See Carola Kaplan, "Conrad's Narrative Occupation of/by Russia in *Under Western Eyes*," *Conradiana* 27, no. 2 (1995): 97–114.

64. Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, 237.

65. *Ibid.*, 251.

66. *Ibid.*, 87, 101.

67. *Ibid.*, 228.

CHAPTER 4

1. Witold Gombrowicz, *A Kind of Testament*, interviews by Dominique de Roux, trans. Alastair Hamilton (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2007), 56.

2. In this chapter, *form* will be capitalized when it refers most directly to Gombrowicz's concept (elaborated here at length) and will appear in lowercase when it refers to form more broadly or to form as it is more commonly understood. I have tried to follow this as much as possible, but if readers find inconsistencies in this chapter it is because sometimes the distinction between the two uses of the word is not necessarily clear-cut in every case, and because Gombrowicz himself was not consistent in capitalizing the word. Moreover, I think Gombrowicz himself would avoid making an absolute rule about capitalizing *form* in every instance, as that might solidify it, while the point of theorizing it in the first place was to loosen it.

3. Witold Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1997), trans. Danuta Borhardt (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000). The title of the novel is not a real word, and is thus untranslatable, but it is speculated to be a reference to the character Freddy Durkee from Sinclair Lewis's novel *Babbitt*. Gombrowicz's other works include the novels *Trans-Atlantyk* (1953), *Pornografia* (1960), and *Cosmos* (1966); the plays *Iwona Princess of Burgundy*, *Operetta*, and *The Marriage*; and the nonfictional *Diary*, *A Kind of Testament*, *Polish Memories*, and *Philosophy in Six Hours and Fifteen Minutes*.

4. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, 294.

5. Gombrowicz, *Kind of Testament*, 58.

6. In an expression of this commonly invoked divide between aesthetics and politics, or between the properly literary and the merely thematic concerns, as it appears in the wake of postcolonial studies in particular, Jonathan Culler has noted with some dissatisfaction: "One problem of postcolonial studies is the absence of good accounts of the literary norms against which postcolonial authors are said to be writing. Lacking description of such norms, the

discourse of critics swiftly becomes thematic, focusing on questions of identity and resistance to authority, rather than on artistic innovation” (*The Literary in Theory* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007], 11). While Culler seems to mark this as a shortcoming specific to postcolonial literary studies, I think that this bipolar vision is already inherent in literary studies in general. Treating “thematic” considerations of identity and resistance to authority as distinct from questions of artistic innovation severs innovation from institutions of authority, including cultural ones, as if innovation could be independent from the value systems that govern literary recognition. For an overview of the way in which the question of reading stands at the center of the perceived conflict between cultural studies and literary studies, see Ellen Rooney, “Form and Contentment,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 61, no. 6 (March 2000): 17–40.

7. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, 328.
8. Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, trans. Borchardt, 70–71.
9. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, 119. Translation modified: *dziela* is not merely “books” (as the Vallee translation has it; Witold Gombrowicz, *Dziennik*, 1953–1969, trans. Lillian Vallee [Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1997]) but “masterpieces,” which is a significant distinction in the context of my argument.
10. Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, trans. Borchardt, 41.
11. *Ibid.*, 42.
12. *Ibid.*, 45.
13. Slavoj Žižek, “Will You Laugh for Me, Please,” n.d., Lacan.com, www.lacan.com/zizeklaugh.htm, and “The Interpassive Subject,” *Traverses*, 1998, Lacan.com, www.lacan.com/zizek-pompidou.htm. In Slavoj Žižek’s *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), “the subject supposed to believe” is elaborated in relation to Jacques Lacan’s “subject supposed to know.”
14. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, 30.
15. Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, trans. Borchardt, 8.
16. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), 101.
17. *Ibid.*, 102.
18. Gombrowicz, *Kind of Testament*, 79.
19. Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *A History of Six Ideas: An Essay in Aesthetics*, trans. Christopher Kasparek (Melbourne: Nijhoff, 1980), 241.
20. Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, trans. Borchardt, 79–80.
21. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, 295 (my emphasis).
22. Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, trans. Borchardt, 7.
23. *Ibid.*, 9. Translation modified: I retained the original “ah!” instead of the translator’s choice of “indeed.”
24. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, 287.
25. Gombrowicz, *Kind of Testament*, 73.

26. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, 340.
27. *Ibid.*, 292.
28. Jerzy Jarzębski, “Pojęcie ‘formy’ u Gombrowicza,” in *Gombrowicz i Krytycy*, ed. Zdzisław Lapiński (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1984), 314. My translation.
29. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, 292.
30. *Ibid.*, 42.
31. Gombrowicz, *Kind of Testament*, 76.
32. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, 689.
33. In thinking about Gombrowiczian form in relation to Kant and a few other thinkers in this chapter, I make an effort to avoid engaging in what Ewa Płonowska Ziarek has rightly termed a “game of legitimation [that] usually assumes the form of ‘Reading Gombrowicz with’; for instance, with Kant, with Sartre, Nietzsche, Lacan, Deleuze, Derrida or any other famous Western figure of considerable currency” (introduction to *Gombrowicz’s Grimaces: Modernism, Gender, Nationality*, ed. Ewa Płonowska Ziarek [Albany: SUNY Press, 1998], 15). Instead, these figures—except Slavoj Žižek, of course—are an organic part of Gombrowicz’s own context. A more extensive genealogy of Gombrowicz’s influences would include nineteenth-century neo-Kantian aesthetics, especially that of Herman Cohen, and the more general resurgence of interest in form and formalism in early twentieth-century avant-garde movements in Russia, in Central Europe, and in interwar Poland in particular. Among the latter were the originally Polish formalist movements of *unizm* and *formizm*, as well as the Polish adopters of futurism, cubism, and expressionism. Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (or Witkacy), a friend of both Gombrowicz and Bruno Schulz, was a prominent formist. As Gombrowicz writes of his closest allies, “We were a trinity. Witkiewicz: intentional affirmation of the madness of ‘pure form’ through vengeance as well as the fulfillment of his tragic destiny, the distraught madman. Schulz: self-destruction in form, the drowned madman. I: burning desire to use form to get at my ‘I’ and reality, the madman in revolt” (*Diary*, 528). For recent studies of Gombrowicz’s cultural and personal contexts, see Michael Goddard, *Gombrowicz, Polish Modernism, and the Subversion of Form* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2010); and George Z. Gasyna, *Polish, Hybrid, and Otherwise: Exilic Discourse in Joseph Conrad and Witold Gombrowicz* (New York: Continuum Books, 2011). Jean-Paul Sartre, who also figures in this chapter, was Gombrowicz’s contemporary.
34. Rodolphe Gasché, *The Idea of Form: Rethinking Kant’s Aesthetics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 8.
35. *Ibid.*, 85, 31.
36. *Ibid.*, 85.
37. *Ibid.*, 179.
38. *Ibid.*, 109, emphasis mine.
39. Quoted in *ibid.*, 36.
40. *Ibid.*, 109, emphasis mine.
41. Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, trans. Borchardt, 72–73.

42. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, 132.
43. *Ibid.*, 132–33, translation modified. Vallee renders “i on teraz przeżywa wszystko dookoła” as “and now he [the crocodile] shoots everything around him,” but the not-quite-killed crocodile is not actually *shooting* but *permeating* or *piercing* everything.
44. Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, trans. Borchardt, 73.
45. *Ibid.*, 1.
46. *Ibid.*, 2.
47. *Ibid.*
48. *Ibid.*, 15.
49. *Ibid.*, 15.
50. *Ibid.*, 16.
51. *Ibid.*
52. Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, trans. Borchardt, 113.
53. Gombrowicz, *Kind of Testament*, 73.
54. *Ibid.*, 56.
55. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, 339. Emphasis mine.
56. Translation modified. In the original: “Uświadomienie sobie owego ‘niedo’—niedokształtowania, niedorozwoju, niedojrzałości—nie tylko nie osłabia, ale wzmacnia” (Gombrowicz, *Dziennik* 1:148). In English, Vallee has it as “making oneself conscious of that ‘lack of’—lack of form, underdevelopment, immaturity” (Gombrowicz, *Diary*, 115).
57. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, 32.
58. *Ibid.*, 339.
59. *Ibid.*, 564.
60. These writings have been collected in *Diario argentino* (1968) and *Perigrinaciones argentinas* (1987).
61. “Gombrowicz les dice a sus compatriotas que no traten de rivalizar con Occidente y sus formas, sino que traten de tomar conciencia de la fuerza que implica su propia y no acabada forma, su propia y no acabada inmadurez. Buena lección para nosotros” (my translation). Ernesto Sábato, “Prólogo a la edición argentina,” in *Ferdydurke*, by Witold Gombrowicz (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 2001), 7–14. For an account of how *Ferdydurke* was translated, see Daniel Balderston, “Rex Café, Buenos Aires, 1947: On the Spanish Translation of Gombrowicz’s *Ferdydurke*,” *Polish Review* 60, no. 2 (2015): 29–37.
62. Ricardo Piglia quoted in Juan José Saer, *El concepto de ficción* (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 1997), 21.
63. Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, trans. Borchardt, 79.
64. Witold Gombrowicz, *Trans-Atlantyck*, trans. Carolyn French and Nina Karsov (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 33.
65. *Ibid.*, 34.
66. *Ibid.*, 32.
67. *Ibid.*
68. *Ibid.*, 33.
69. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, 115.

70. Ibid., 126.

71. Casanova, *World Republic of Letters*.

72. Ibid., 207.

73. Ibid., 325.

74. Casanova discusses Gombrowicz's efforts to get his works translated, but she disregards the primary site of his struggle for recognition (form and language) as well as his relationship to Poland (which would require her to read him, and which would complicate her thesis about minor writers' relation to their nations). She cites Gombrowicz only to confirm the idea that Paris is the literary center, but any such acknowledgment on Gombrowicz's part must be understood in the proper context: he knows that going through Paris is necessary, especially for a displaced writer, but sees fame, or "consecration," alone not as an end in itself but as one of the means. While Casanova conflates literature with the establishment of literary value, Gombrowicz works to reveal their noncoincidence (143–44).

75. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, 582.

76. Ibid., 315.

77. This is a version of Rey Chow's observation that non-European or non-Western cultures are always-already comparative. See Chow, *Age of the World Target*.

78. It silences even the "consecrated" because it displaces reading; because to be "recognized" as a great writer is not the same as to be understood, read, taken on one's own terms—because, if one needs to be "recognized" before one can be taken on one's own terms, then it's no longer possible to be taken on one's own terms.

79. Casanova rarely considers literary texts themselves, even to ask what "intrinsic" qualities might justify the selection of some texts over others, or according to what aesthetic criteria authors might be "consecrated." (For a related critique of her failure to pay close attention to texts, see Christopher Prendergast, "The World Republic of Letters," in Prendergast, *Debating World Literature*.)

80. It is beyond my scope here to engage with the range of critiques Jameson's essay has provoked. For sympathetic and comprehensive discussions of his essay, including responses to many of those critiques, see Ian Buchanan, "National Allegory Today: A Return to Jameson," and Imre Szeman, "Who's Afraid of National Allegory? Jameson, Literary Criticism, Globalization," both in *On Jameson: From Postmodernism to Globalism*, ed. Caren Irr and Ian Buchanan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 173–88 and 189–211 respectively.

81. Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (Autumn 1986): 69. Jameson intends to speak about specifically Third World texts (though of course this specificity itself, homogenizing and essentializing wildly different contexts, is questionable), but he should be properly understood as referring to non-First World texts—that is, any traditions that share the structural, formal condition of being outside. This not only allows Polish literature to be included alongside Third World literatures but also more correctly identifies the similarity among the excluded literatures: not in terms of an essential or intrinsic quality but in terms of this structural relation to Europe, precisely of exclusion.

82. *Ibid.*, 65 (my emphasis).

83. James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Allegory,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 99.

84. See Margaret Cohen, *The Sentimental Education of the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 23, and the collection of Franco Moretti’s significant essays on the subject in *Distant Reading* (New York: Verso, 2013).

85. Moretti’s work of adapting quantitative methods to literary history has received much commentary and criticism, which is outside the scope of this chapter to engage fully. For one significant critique, see Katie Trumpener, “Paratext and Genre System: A Response to Franco Moretti,” *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 1 (Autumn 2009): 159–71.

86. Franco Moretti, “The Slaughterhouse of Literature,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2000): 208.

87. Moretti’s dismissal of reading—his rejection of close reading (“secularized theology, really”) and his call elsewhere for “distant reading” to replace close attention to single texts (“Conjectures on World Literature”; *Distant Reading*)—is quite explicit and well known. My point is that his very reference to “reading”—in “distant reading” as in “the great unread”—is unexamined.

88. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, 72.

89. *Ibid.*, 694.

90. *Ibid.*, 695.

91. *Ibid.*, 696.

92. *Ibid.*, 698.

93. *Ibid.*, 701–2.

94. *Ibid.*, 702.

95. *Ibid.*, 703.

96. *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

97. *Ibid.*, 704.

98. *Ibid.*, 705–6, translation modified. My rendering departs slightly from Vallee’s, which has “ungainly” and “little” instead of “clumsy” and “minor”; “ignoble” instead of “wicked”; and “A firecracker or a real blaze?” instead of “An artificial fire? A real fire?”

99. Gombrowicz, *Kind of Testament*, 66.

100. Haun Saussy, “Exquisite Cadavers Stitched from Fresh Nightmares,” in Saussy, *Comparative Literature*, 21.

CHAPTER 5

1. Barbara Cassin, ed., *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2004). Since this chapter was written, *Vocabulaire* has been published in English (*Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. and trans. Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra,

and Michael Wood [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014]), but I have decided to retain my own translations from the original.

2. Józef Tischner, *Historia filozofii po góralsku*, 1. All translations from Tischner are my own. Passages from *Historia* are rendered here closest to standard English, a choice many readers will find problematic because the book appears to demand instead a translation into some dialect of English spoken by a group that might “resemble” Góral. But dialects are truly incommensurable: they reflect the social, historical, material, and environmental circumstances proper only to their speakers. In addition, the historical setting of *Historia* is not explicit—if it turned out to take place in the eighteenth century, for instance, it would be just as problematic to have rendered it in twentieth-century British Cockney, US Appalachian, or Nigerian English. Only administrative languages are translatable with one another, and any “faithful” translation from one dialect into another that would aspire to maintain the source dialect’s “authenticity” would have to pass through such languages in the first place. This difficulty is part and parcel of what I call “reading in the mode of translation,” elaborated further in this chapter.

3. The figure of the Góral will be familiar to readers of Joseph Conrad from his 1901 story “Amy Foster” (in *The Portable Conrad*, ed. Morton Dawn Zabel [New York: Penguin, 1975], 155–91), where Yanko Goorall, a poor emigrant shipwrecked in the English countryside, finds hospitality—and a wife—among the villagers, but his attachment to his foreign speech proves inassimilable: “His wife snatched [their] child out of his arms as he sat on the doorstep crooning to it a song such as the mothers sing to babies in his mountains. She seemed to think he was doing it some harm” (187).

4. See note 2 above.

5. Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 6, 11.

6. Emily Apter, “Untranslatables: A World System,” *New Literary History* 39 (2008): 583, 584. This is an earlier version of “Untranslatables: A World System,” a chapter in her *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (New York: Verso, 2013), 31–44.

7. Sandra Bermann, introduction to *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation*, ed. Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 6.

8. Chow, *Age of the World Target*, 79.

9. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, “Introduction: Of Colonies, Cannibals, and Vernaculars,” in *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (London: Routledge, 1999), 4.

10. As Spivak writes, in the future anterior one “attends upon what will have happened as a result of one’s work” (*Death of a Discipline*, 29).

11. Rancière’s book, too, presents itself as a kind of translation—a close reading, nothing more than a putting together—of the writings left by Jacotot and his disciples. And Jacotot’s own fate—caught in political conflict between France and Belgium, as well as in the language policies and ethno-linguistic divisions of his adoptive country—might serve as an entry point for

a strikingly different story of Europe and/in translation from the one I sketch in this chapter. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

12. *Ibid.*, 10.

13. *Ibid.*, 23.

14. *Ibid.*, 11.

15. *Ibid.*, 133.

16. “Faire en sorte que les langues de l’Europe soient prises en compte, et pas seulement d’un point de vue patrimonial comme on préserve les espèces menacées” (Cassin, *Vocabulaire*, xviii). My translation.

17. The book’s audience is broader than its diegetic addressee, and Góral’s themselves are a popular cultural icon. *Historia* was adapted for a TV series (1999–2005), and Tischner’s work in the dialect was well known from his radio readings of *Historia*, from the earlier programs “Seven Cardinal Sins in Góral” (1995) and “Tischner Reads the Catechism” (1996), and from annual sermons delivered in the Tatra mountains (collected in *Słowo o Ślebodzie: Kazania spod Turbacza 1981–1997*).

18. “L’un des problèmes les plus urgents que pose l’Europe est celui des langues” (Cassin, *Vocabulaire*, xvii).

19. “Jouer le maintien de la pluralité, en rendant manifestes à chaque fois le sens et l’intérêt des différences, seule manière de faciliter réellement la communication entre les langues et les cultures” (*ibid.*, xvii).

20. “L’intraduisible, c’est plutôt ce qu’on ne cesse pas de (ne pas) traduire” (*ibid.*, xvii).

21. “Nous n’avons conféré à aucune langue, morte ou vivante, de statut particulier. Ni universalisme logique indifférent aux langues, ni nationalisme ontologique avec essentialisation de génie des langues” (*ibid.*, xx).

22. This absence is itself scarcely visible as an absence. “Ideally,” Emily Apter writes, “[*Vocabulaire*] would have had a companion volume covering Asian, African, Indian, and Middle Eastern languages”—but not Slavic or other Eastern European ones (“Untranslatables” [2013], 32).

23. *Russian* often functions, in *Vocabulaire* as elsewhere, as shorthand for *Slavic*, but even *Slavic* itself, when used metonymically for Eastern Europe, conceals the linguistic heterogeneity of the region, whose non-Slavic languages include Albanian, Estonian, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Romanian, Romany, and Yiddish.

24. Miglena Nikolchina’s “Inverted Forms and Heterotopian Homonymy: Althusser, Mamardashvili, and the Problem of ‘Man’” deals precisely with an instance of philosophical mistranslation across the East-West divide (a mistranslation without an original, I might add, in that neither side has definitive authority) and would be an exemplary complement to entries dealing with humanism, man, or Marxism. In Godzich and Starosta, “Second-Hand Europe,” 79–100.

25. “Chaque entrée part d’un noeud d’intraductibilité et procède à la comparaison de réseaux terminologiques” (Cassin, *Vocabulaire*, xviii).

26. Barbara Johnson, *Mother Tongues: Sexuality, Trials, Motherhood, Translation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 16.

27. *Ibid.*, 16–17.

28. *Ibid.*, 53.

29. In her critique of Cassin's project, Emily Apter notes that *Vocabulaire* retains "a measure of national recidivism" but does not remark on its more problematic, if unwitting, reconsolidation of "Europe" itself ("Untranslatables" [2013], 36). Moreover, Europe as such—interestingly and problematically—disappears entirely from the title of the English translation, which turns *Vocabulaire européen* into *Dictionary of Untranslatables*. The modifier "European" gets lost in this translation as perhaps an inconvenient mark of locality. In a similar elision of specificity unbecoming of her theoretical commitments, Apter writes that the volume "calls into question the very possibility of naming the predicates of Western thought" (31)—and so "European" imperceptibly slips into "Western" as if the two were interchangeable or, again, as if "Western" afforded the easier translation because it is less marked; and the plural "philosophies" becomes "philosophical." The entire problematic this chapter calls attention to is thus disappeared and becomes illegible in the English version.

30. Tischner's works of philosophy—many translated into German, French, Italian, Swedish, Dutch, and Czech—include *Filozofia chrześcijańska w dialogu z marksizmem* (1979), translated as *Marxism and Christianity: The Quarrel and the Dialogue in Poland*; *Filozofia dramatu* (1990), translated into German as *Das menschliche Drama*; and *Spór o istnienie człowieka* (1998) [Controversy over the existence of man]. The online journal *Thinking in Values: The Tischner Institute Journal of Philosophy* provides an overview, and partial English translations, of selections of his work.

31. Tischner served as Solidarity's unofficial chaplain. It should be noted that the mode of "as if," which here I impute to *Historia*, also belongs explicitly to Eastern European dissident political philosophy and practice of the 1970s and 1980s, via figures such as Václav Havel and Adam Michnik. In the practice of "living in truth," it meant acting as if justice and freedom were already manifest (e.g., Havel's 1978 essay "The Power of the Powerless," in Havel, *Open Letters*, 125–214). The connection between the two modes of "as if"—the literary-translational and the political-historical—demands a more careful elaboration and is the subject of my article in progress, tentatively entitled "Solidarity's Debts."

32. This is not to say that Tischner is the first person to use the dialect in literary writing. Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer's *Na skalnym Podhalu* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1955), a series of novellas published between 1903 and 1910, is an important predecessor.

33. This dynamic encountered in reading an un/familiar dialect is akin to what Naoki Sakai means when he writes that "translation is not only a border crossing but also and preliminarily an act of drawing a border, of bordering" ("Translation and the Figure of Border: Toward the Apprehension of Translation as a Social Action," *Profession* 10 [2010]: 32).

34. J. Tischner, *Historia*, 5.
35. John Dryden, "On Translation," in *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*, ed. Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 17. The essay is a preface to Dryden's own translation of Ovid's *Epistles* (1680).
36. Dryden, "On Translation," 20.
37. *Ibid.*, 31 (emphasis mine).
38. Johnson, *Mother Tongues*, 36.
39. *Ibid.*, 37.
40. Derek Walcott, "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?" *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 16, no. 1 (February 1974): 8.
41. This coincides with a certain ethnographic observation: Góral's continually reinvent their traditions by borrowing from Polish popular culture, other folk traditions, American soap operas, and the Polish American diasporic cultures (see Frances Pine, "Pilfering Identity: Gorale Culture in Post-socialist Poland," *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* 20, no. 1 [1997]: 59–73. Thaddeus V. Gromada's *Tatra Highlander Folk Culture in Poland and America* (Hasbrouck Heights, NJ: Tatra Eagle Press, 2012), on the other hand, presents a documentary record of Góral diaspora from within, thus more generously reflecting on the cultural negotiations of the dislocated Góral experience in emigration.
42. J. Tischner, *Historia*, 8.
43. *Ibid.*, 10.
44. *Ibid.*, 9.
45. *Ibid.*, 10.
46. *Ibid.*, 46.
47. *Ibid.*, 47.
48. *Ibid.*, 109.
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*, 110.
51. *Ibid.*
52. In "Europa po góralsku" [Europe in Góral] (Instytut Myśli Józefa Tischnera [Tischner Institute] website, November 19, 2005, http://www.tischner.org.pl/lukasz-tischner/europa_po_goralsku), Łukasz Tischner traces the connections that Józef Tischner himself had made between Europe as a space of freedom, the logic of reciprocity and the gift, and his notion of home.
53. Rancière, *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 62.
54. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 6–7.
55. *Ibid.*, 10.
56. Gal. 3:28, quoted in *ibid.*, 9.
57. Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 76.
58. Józef Tischner, *Spór o istnienie człowieka* (Kraków: Znak, 1998), 298.
59. Józef Tischner, *Słowo o Ślebodzie: Kazania spod Turbacza 1981–1997*, ed. Wojciech Bonowicz (Kraków: Znak, 2003), 12.

60. In contrast to the image of Góral culture as colorful in its folklore but otherwise self-enclosed and separate from mainstream national culture, Józef Tischner elaborates—especially in the sermons—an image of them as engaged citizens, with a long history of armed patriotic struggle. There are two aspects of this history relevant for better understanding Tischner’s thought. The first is the still-controversial among Góral, but marginal with respect to national history, figure of Józef Kuraś, leader of a partisan unit that resisted the Nazi occupation and then continued to fight even after World War II was officially declared to be over, this time against Soviet presence and against its local supporters. The second aspect of this history is the myth perpetuated by the Nazis that the highlanders were a distinct, and purely Germanic, ethnic group (Goralenvolk). They attempted to elicit collaboration from the local population by proposing to eventually establish a separate state for them and to make their dialect the language of instruction in schools. The danger attending the conversion of a dialect into language, then, must be apparent to Tischner even as, in *Historia*, he wants to protect it from disappearance.

CONCLUSION

1. William G. Rosenberg (chair), Elena Gapova, Ljubov Kiseleva, Roman Koropecy, Volodymyr Kravchenko, and Irina M. Savelieva (participants), “The Current State of Humanities Scholarship in Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine: Reports from the Region” panel, National Convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, Philadelphia, November 2008.

2. Roland Barthes, “Research: The Young,” in *Rustle of Language*, 72 (emphasis mine).

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